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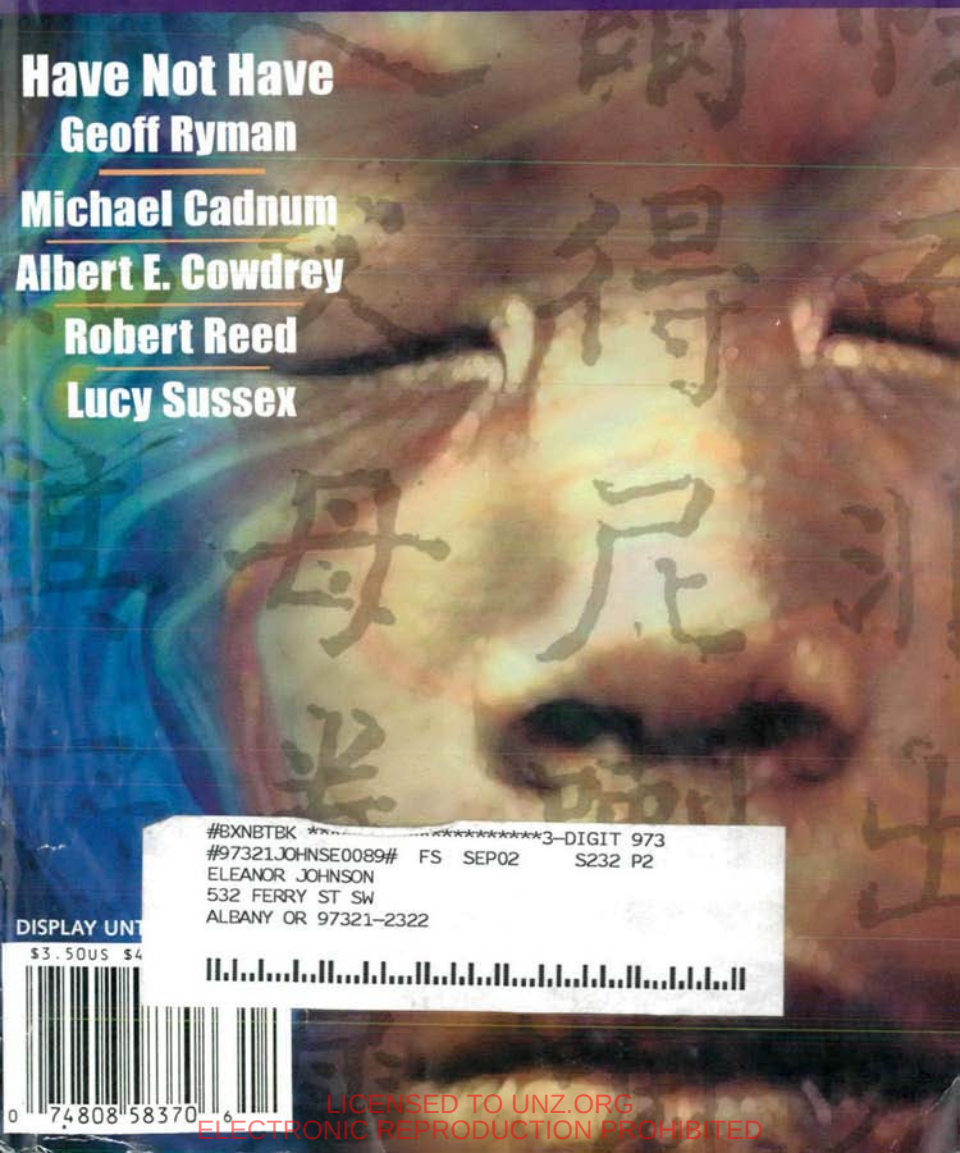

Have Not Have
Geoff Ryman

Michael Cadnum

Albert E. Cowdrey

Robert Reed

Lucy Sussex

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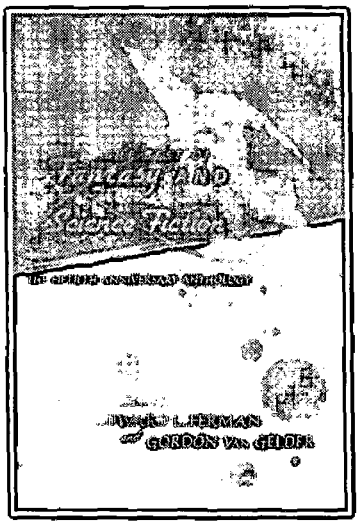

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NOVELETS

HAVE NOT HAVE 4 Geoff Ryman
DEMOLITION 77 Nancy Etchemendy
ABSOLUTE UNCERTAINTY 136 Lucy Sussex

SHORT STORIES

THE MOONSHRIEK DIALOGUE 36 Michael Nethercott
THE GOLDEN CHAIN 43 Carrie Richerson
NATURE 2000 54 Albert E. Cowdrey
RUDE KATE 59 July Lewis
SEASON TO TASTE 104 Robert Reed
AKHENATEN 112 Alex Irvine
ELF TRAP 125 Michael Cadnum

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 26 Charles de Lint
BOOKS 30 James Sallis
FILMS 99 Kathi Maio
A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK: PASCAL'S TERROR 130 Gregory Benford
COMING ATTRACTIONS 160
CURIOSITIES 162 Paul Di Filippo

CARTOONS: Danny Shanahan (42), Mark Heath (58), Tom Cheney (124).
COVER BY MICHAEL GARLAND FOR "HAVE NOT HAVE"

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Born in Canada, educated in the US, Geoff Ryman has lived in England for the past three decades. His short fiction has appeared in Interzone, New Worlds, *and several anthologies, but he is best known for his novels* The Unconquered Country, The Child Garden, 253, *and* Was. *His latest novel,* Lust, *is due out in England by the time you read this.*

Many of Mr. Ryman's stories consider the social ramifications of new technology. Here, in his first story for us, he takes us to a remote section of China for just such a consideration.

Have Not Have

By Geoff Ryman

MAE LIVED IN THE LAST village in the world to go on line. After that, everyone else went on Air.

Mae was the village's fashion expert. She advised on makeup, sold cosmetics, and provided good dresses. Every farmer's wife needed at least one good dress. The richer wives, like Mr. Wing's wife Kwan, wanted more than one.

Mae would sketch what was being worn in the capital. She would always add a special touch: a lime green scarf with sequins; or a lacy ruffle with colorful embroidery. A good dress was for display. "We are a happier people and we can wear these gay colors," Mae would advise.

"Yes, that is true," her customer might reply, entranced that fashion expressed their happy culture. "In the photographs, the Japanese women all look so solemn."

"So full of themselves," said Mae, and lowered her head and scowled, and she and her customer would laugh, feeling as sophisticated as anyone in the world.

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Mae got her ideas as well as her mascara and lipsticks from her trips to the town. Even in those days, she was aware that she was really a dealer in information. Mae had a mobile phone. The mobile phone was necessary, for the village had only one line telephone, in the tea room. She needed to talk to her suppliers in private, because information shared aloud in the tea room was information that could no longer be sold.

It was a delicate balance. To get into town, she needed to be driven, often by a client. The art then was to screen the client from her real sources.

So Mae took risks. She would take rides by herself with the men, already boozy after the harvest, going down the hill for fun. Sometimes she needed to speak sharply to them, to remind them who she was.

The safest ride was with the village's schoolteacher, Mr. Shen. Teacher Shen only had a pony and trap, so the trip, even with an early rise, took one whole day down and one whole day back. But there was no danger of fashion secrets escaping with Teacher Shen. His interests lay in poetry and the science curriculum. In town, they would visit the ice cream parlor, with its clean tiles, and he would lick his bowl, guiltily, like a child. He was a kindly man, one of their own, whose education was a source of pride for the whole village. He and Mae had known each other longer than they could remember.

Sometimes, however, the ride had to be with someone who was not exactly a friend.

In the April before everything changed there was to be an important wedding.

Seker, whose name meant Sugar, was the daughter of the village's pilgrim to Mecca, their Haj. Seker was marrying into the Atakoloo family, and the wedding was a big event. Mae was to make her dress.

One of Mae's secrets was that she was a very bad seamstress. The wedding dress was being made professionally, and Mae had to get into town and collect it. When Sunni Haseem offered to drive her down in exchange for a fashion expedition, Mae had to agree.

Sunni herself was from an old village family, but her husband Faysal Haseem was from further down the hill. Mr. Haseem was a beefy brute whom even his wife did not like except for his suits and money. He puffed

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on cigarettes and his tanned fingers were as thick and weathered as the necks of turtles. In the back seat with Mae, Sunni giggled and prodded and gleamed with the thought of visiting town with her friend and confidant who was going to unleash her beauty secrets.

Mae smiled and whispered, promising much. "I hope my source will be present today," she said. "She brings me my special colors, you cannot get them anywhere else. I don't ask where she gets them." Mae lowered her eyes and her voice. "I think her husband...."

A dubious gesture, meaning, that perhaps the goods were stolen, stolen from — who knows? — supplies meant for foreign diplomats? The tips of Mae's fingers rattled once, in provocation, across her client's arm.

The town was called Yeshibozkay, which meant Green Valley. It was now approached through corridors of raw apartment blocks set on beige desert soil. It had a new jail and discos with mirror balls, billboards, illuminated shop signs and Toyota jeeps that belched out blue smoke.

But the town center was as Mae remembered it from childhood. Traditional wooden houses crowded crookedly together, flat-roofed with shutters, shingle-covered gables and tiny fading shop signs. The old market square was still full of peasants selling vegetables laid out on mats. Middle-aged men still played chess outside tiny cafes; youths still prowled in packs.

There was still the public address system. The address system barked out news and music from the top of the electricity poles. Its sounds drifted over the city, announcing public events or new initiatives against drug dealers. It told of progress on the new highway, and boasted of the well-known entertainers who were visiting the town.

Mr. Haseem parked near the market, and the address system seemed to enter Mae's lungs, like cigarette smoke, perfume, or hair spray. She stepped out of the van and breathed it in. The excitement of being in the city trembled in her belly. As much as the bellowing of shoppers, farmers and donkeys; as much as the smell of raw petrol and cut greenery and drains, the address system made her spirits rise. She and her middle-aged client looked on each other and gasped and giggled at themselves.

"Now," Mae said, stroking Sunni's hair, her cheek. "It is time for a complete makeover. Let's really do you up. I cannot do as good work up in the hills."

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Mae took her client to Halat's, the same hairdresser as Sunni might have gone to anyway. But Mae was greeted by Halat with cries and smiles and kisses on the cheek. That implied a promise that Mae's client would get special treatment. There was a pretense of consultancy. Mae offered advice, comments, cautions. Careful! she has such delicate skin! Hmm, the hair could use more shaping there. And Halat hummed as if perceiving what had been hidden before and then agreed to give the client what she would otherwise have given. But Sunni's nails were soaking, and she sat back in the center of attention, like a queen.

All of this allowed the hairdresser to charge more. Mae had never pressed her luck and asked for a cut. Something beady in Halat's eyes told her there would be no point. What Mae got out of it was standing, and that would lead to more work later.

With cucumbers over her eyes, Sunni was safely trapped. Mae announced, "I just have a few errands to run. You relax and let all cares fall away." She disappeared before Sunni could protest.

Mae ran to collect the dress. A disabled girl, a very good seamstress called Miss Soo, had opened up a tiny shop of her own.

Miss Soo was grateful for any business, poor thing, skinny as a rail and twisted. After the usual greetings, Miss Soo shifted round and hobbled and dragged her way to the back of the shop to fetch the dress. Her feet hissed sideways across the uneven concrete floor. Poor little thing, Mae thought. How can she sew?

Yet Miss Soo had a boyfriend in the fashion business. Genuinely in the fashion business, far away in the capital city, Balshang. The girl often showed Mae his photograph. It was like a magazine photograph. The boy was very handsome, with a shiny shirt and coiffed-up hair. She kept saying she was saving up money to join him. It was a mystery to Mae what such a boy was doing with a cripple for a girlfriend. Why did he keep contact with her? Publicly Mae would say to friends of the girl: it is the miracle of love, what a good heart he must have. Otherwise she kept her own counsel which was this: you would be very wise not to visit him in Balshang.

The boyfriend sent Miss Soo the patterns of dresses, photographs, magazines, or even whole catalogs. There was one particularly treasured thing; a showcase publication. The cover was like the lid of a box, and it showed in full color the best of the nation's fashion design.

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Models so rich and thin they looked like ghosts. They looked half asleep, as if the only place they carried the weight of their wealth was on their eyelids. It was like looking at Western or Japanese women, and yet not. These were their own people, so long-legged, so modern, so ethereal, as if they were made of air.

Mae hated the clothes. They looked like washing-up towels. Oatmeal or gray in one color and without a trace of adornment.

Mae sighed with lament. "Why do these rich women go about in their underwear?"

The girl shuffled back with the dress, past piles of unsold oatmeal cloth. Miss Soo had a skinny face full of teeth, and she always looked like she was staring ahead in fear. "If you are rich you have no need to try to look rich." Her voice was soft. She made Mae feel like a peasant without meaning to. She made Mae yearn to escape herself, to be someone else, for the child was effortlessly talented, somehow effortlessly in touch with the outside world.

"Ah yes," Mae sighed. "But my clients, you know, they live in the hills." She shared a conspiratorial smile with the girl. "Their taste! Speaking of which, let's have a look at my wedding cake of a dress."

The dress was actually meant to look like a cake, all pink and white sugar icing, except that it kept moving all by itself. White wires with Styrofoam bobbles on the ends were surrounded with clouds of white netting.

"Does it need to be quite so busy?" the girl asked, doubtfully, encouraged too much by Mae's smile.

"I know my clients," replied Mae coolly. This is at least, she thought, a dress that makes some effort. She inspected the work. The needlework was delicious, as if the white cloth were cream that had flowed together. The poor creature could certainly sew, even when she hated the dress.

"That will be fine," said Mae, and made move toward her purse.

"You are so kind!" murmured Miss Soo, bowing slightly.

Like Mae, Miss Soo was of Chinese extraction. That was meant not to make any difference, but somehow it did. Mae and Miss Soo knew what to expect of each other.

"Some tea?" the girl asked. It would be pale, fresh-brewed, not the liquid tar that the native Karsistanis poured from continually boiling kettles.

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"It would be delightful, but I do have a customer waiting," explained Mae.

The dress was packed in brown paper and carefully tied so it would not crease. There were farewells, and Mae scurried back to the hairdresser's. Sunni was only just finished, hair spray and scent rising off her like steam.

"This is the dress," said Mae and peeled back part of the paper, to give Halat and Sunni a glimpse of the tulle and Styrofoam.

"Oh!" the women said, as if all that white were clouds, in dreams.

And Halat was paid. There were smiles and nods and compliments and then they left.

Outside the shop, Mae breathed out as though she could now finally speak her mind. "Oh! She is good, that little viper, but you have to watch her, you have to make her work. Did she give you proper attention?"

"Oh, yes, very special attention. I am lucky to have you for a friend," said Sunni. "Let me pay you something for your trouble."

Mae hissed through her teeth. "No, no, I did nothing, I will not hear of it." It was a kind of ritual.

There was no dream in finding Sunni's surly husband. Mr. Haseem was red-faced, half-drunk in a club with unvarnished walls and a television.

"You spend my money," he declared. His eyes were on Mae.

"My friend Mae makes no charges," snapped Sunni.

"She takes something from what they charge you." Mr. Haseem glowered like a thunderstorm.

"She makes them charge me less, not more," replied Sunni, her face going like stone.

The two women exchanged glances. Mae's eyes could say: How can you bear it, a woman of culture like you?

It is my tragedy, came the reply, aching out of the ashamed eyes. So they sat while the husband sobered up and watched television. Mae contemplated the husband's hostility to her, and what might lie behind it. On the screen, the local female newsreader talked: Talents, such people were called. She wore a red dress with a large gold broach. Something had been done to her hair to make it stand up in a sweep before falling away. She was as smoothly groomed as ice. She chattered in a high voice, perky

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through a battery of tiger's teeth. "She goes to Halat's as well," Mae whispered to Sunni. Weather, maps, shots of the honored President and the full cabinet one by one, making big decisions.

The men in the club chose what movie they wanted. Since the Net, they could do that. It had ruined visits to the town. Before, it used to be that the men were made to sit through something the children or families might also like, so you got everyone together for the watching of the television. The clubs had to be more polite. Now, because of the Net, women hardly saw TV at all and the clubs were full of drinking. The men chose another kung-fu movie. Mae and Sunni endured it, sipping Coca Cola. It became apparent that Mr. Haseem would not buy them dinner.

Finally, late in the evening, Mr. Haseem loaded himself into the van. Enduring, unstoppable, and quite dangerous, he drove them back up into the mountains, weaving across the middle of the road.

"You make a lot of money out of all this," Mr. Haseem said to Mae.

"I...I make a little something. I try to maintain the standards of the village. I do not want people to see us as peasants. Just because we live on the high road."

Sunni's husband barked out a laugh. "We are peasants!" Then he added, "You do it for the money."

Sunni sighed in embarrassment. And Mae smiled a hard smile to herself in the darkness. You give yourself away, Sunni's-man. You want my husband's land. You want him to be your dependent. And you don't like your wife's money coming to me to prevent it. You want to make both me and my husband your slaves.

It is a strange thing to spend four hours in the dark listening to an engine roar with a man who seeks to destroy you.

In late May, school ended.

There were no fewer than six girls graduating and each one of them needed a new dress. Miss Soo was making two of them; Mae would have to do the others, but she needed to buy the cloth. She needed another trip to Yeshibozkay.

Mr. Wing was going to town to collect a new television set for the village. It was going to be connected to the Net. There was high excitement:

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graduation, a new television set. Some of the children lined up to wave good-bye to them.

Their village, Kizuldah, was surrounded by high, terraced mountains. The rice fields went up in steps, like a staircase into clouds. There was snow on the very tops year round.

It was a beautiful day, cloudless, but still relatively cool. Kwan, Mr. Wing's wife, was one of Mae's favorite women; she was intelligent, sensible; there was less dissembling with her. Mae enjoyed the drive.

Mr. Wing parked the van in the market square. As Mae reached into the back for her hat, she heard the public address system. The voice of the Talent was squawking.

"...a tremendous advance for culture," the Talent said. "Now the Green Valley is no farther from the center of the world than Paris, Singapore, or Tokyo."

Mae sniffed. "Hmm. Another choice on this fishing net of theirs."

Wing stood outside the van, ramrod straight in his brown and tan town shirt. "I want to hear this," he said, smiling slightly, taking nips of smoke from his cigarette.

Kwan fanned the air. "Your modern wires say that smoking is dangerous. I wish you would follow all this news you hear."

"Ssh!" he insisted.

The bright female voice still enthused. "Previously all such advances left the Valley far behind because of wiring. This advance will be in the air we breathe. Previously all such advances left the Valley behind because of the cost of the new devices needed to receive messages. This new thing will be like Net TV in your head. All you need is the wires in the human mind."

Kwan gathered up her things. "Some nonsense or another," she murmured.

"Next Sunday, there will be a test. The test will happen in Tokyo and Singapore but also here in the Valley at the same time. What Tokyo sees and hears, we will see and hear. Tell everyone you know, next Sunday, there will be a test. There is no need for fear, alarm, or panic."

Mae listened then. There would certainly be a need for fear and panic if the address system said there was none.

"What test, what kind of test? What? What?" the women demanded of the husband.

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Mr. Wing played the relaxed, superior male. He chuckled. "Ho-ho, now you are interested, yes?"

Another man looked up and grinned. "You should watch more TV," he called. He was selling radishes and shook them at the women.

Kwan demanded, "What are they talking about?"

"They will be able to put TV in our heads," said the husband, smiling. He looked down, thinking perhaps wistfully of his own new venture. "Tut. There has been talk of nothing else on the TV for the last year. But I didn't think it would happen."

All the old market was buzzing like flies on carrion, as if it were still news to them. Two youths in strange puffy clothes spun on their heels and slapped each other' s palms, in a gesture that Mae had seen only once or twice before. An old granny waved it all away and kept on accusing a dealer of short measures.

Mae felt grave doubt. "TV in our heads. I don't want TV in my head." She thought of viper newsreaders and kung fu.

Wing said, "It's not just TV. It is more than TV. It is the whole world."

"What does that mean?"

"It will be the Net. Only, in your head. The fools and drunks in these parts just use it to watch movies from Hong Kong. The Net is all things." He began to falter.

"Explain! How can one thing be all things?"

There was a crowd of people gathering to listen.

"Everything is on it. You will see on our new TV." Kwan's husband did not really know either.

The routine was soured. Halat the hairdresser was in a very strange mood, giggly, chattery, her teeth clicking together as if it were cold.

"Oh, nonsense," she said when Mae went into her usual performance. "Is this for a wedding? For a feast?"

"No," said Mae. "It is for my special friend."

The little hussy put both hands either side of her mouth as if in awe. "Oh! Uh!"

"Are you going to do a special job for her or not?" demanded Mae. Her eyes were able to say: I see no one else in your shop.

Oh, how the girl would have loved to say: I am very busy — if you need

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something special come back tomorrow. But money spoke. Halat slightly amended her tone. "Of course. For you."

"I bring my friends to you regularly because you do such good work for them."

"Of course," the child said. "It is all this news, it makes me forget myself."

Mae drew herself up, and looked fierce, forbidding, in a word, older. Her entire body said: do not forget yourself again. The way the child dug away at Kwan's hair with the long comb handle said back: peasants.

The rest of the day did not go well. Mae felt tired, distracted. She made a terrible mistake and, with nothing else to do, accidentally took Kwan to the place where she bought her lipsticks.

"Oh! It is a treasure trove!" exclaimed Kwan.

Idiot, thought Mae to herself. Kwan was good-natured and would not take advantage. But if she talked! There would be clients who would not take such a good-natured attitude, not to have been shown this themselves.

"I do not take everyone here," whispered Mae. "Hmm? This is for special friends only."

Kwan was good-natured, but very far from stupid. Mae remembered, in school Kwan had always been best at letters, best at maths. Kwan was pasting on false eyelashes in a mirror and said, very simply and quickly, "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone."

And that was far too simple and direct. As if Kwan were saying: fashion expert, we all know you. She even looked around and smiled at Mae, and batted her now huge eyes, as if mocking fashion itself.

"Not for you," said Mae. "The false eyelashes. You don't need them."

The dealer wanted a sale. "Why listen to her?" she asked Kwan.

Because, thought Mae, I buy fifty riels' worth of cosmetics from you a year.

"My friend is right," said Kwan, to the dealer. The sad fact was that Kwan was almost magazine-beautiful anyway, except for her teeth and gums. "Thank you for showing me this," said Kwan, and touched Mae's arm. "Thank you," she said to the dealer, having bought one lowly lipstick.

Mae and the dealer glared at each other, briefly. I go somewhere else next time, Mae promised herself.

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There were flies in the ice cream shop, which was usually so frosted and clean. The old man was satisfyingly apologetic, swiping at the flies with a towel. "I am so sorry, so distressing for ladies," he said, as sincerely as possible knowing that he was addressing farm wives from the hills. "The boys have all gone mad, they are not here to help."

Three old Karz grannies in layers of flower-patterned cotton thumped the linoleum floor with sticks. "It is this new madness. I tell you madness is what it is. Do they think people are incomplete? Do they think that Emel here or Fatima need to have TV all the time? In their heads?"

"We have memories," said another old granny, head bobbing.

"We knew a happier world. Oh so polite!"

Kwan murmured to Mae, "Yes. A world in which babies died overnight and the Red Guards would come and take all the harvest."

"What is happening, Kwan?" Mae asked, suddenly forlorn.

"The truth?" said Kwan. "Nobody knows. Not even the big people who make this test. That is why there will be a test." She went very calm and quiet. "No one knows," she said again.

The worst came last. Kwan's ramrod husband was not a man for drinking. He was in the promised cafe at the promised time, sipping tea, having had a haircut and a professional shave. He brandished a set of extension plugs and a coil of thin silky cable rolled around a drum. He lit his cigarette lighter near one end, and the light gleamed like a star at the other.

"Fye buh Ho buh tih kuh," Wing explained. "Light river rope." He shook his head in wonder.

A young man called Sloop, a tribesman, was with him. Sloop was a telephone engineer and thus a member of the aristocracy as far as Mae was concerned. He was going to wire up their new TV. Sloop said with a woman's voice, "The rope was cheap. Where they already have wires, they use DSL." He might as well have been talking English for all Mae understood him.

Wing seemed cheerful. "Come," he said to the ladies. "I will show you what this is all about."

He went to the communal TV and turned it on with an expert's flourish. Up came not a movie or the local news, but a screen full of other buttons.

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"You see? You can choose what you want. You can choose anything." And he touched the screen.

Up came the local Talent, still baring her perfect teeth. She piped in a high, enthusiastic voice that was meant to appeal to men and bright young things.

"Hello. Welcome to the Airnet Information Service. For too long the world has been divided into information haves and have-nots." She held up one hand toward the Heavens of information and the other out toward the citizens of the Valley, inviting them to consider themselves as have-nots.

"Those in the developed world can use their TVs to find any information they need at any time. They do this through the Net."

Incomprehension followed. There were circles and squares linked by wires in diagrams. Then they jumped up into the sky, into the air, only the air was full of arching lines. The field, they called it, but it was nothing like a field. In Karsistani, it was called the Lightning-flow, Compass-point Yearning Field. "Everywhere in the world." Then the lightning flow was shown striking people's heads. "There have been many medical tests to show this is safe."

"Hitting people with lightning?" Kwan asked in crooked amusement. "That does sound so safe."

"Umm," said Wing, trying to think how best to advocate the new world. "Thought is electrical messages. In our heads. So, this thing, it works in the head like thought."

"That's only the Format," said Sloop. "Once we're formatted, we can use Air, and Air happens in other dimensions."

What?

"There are eleven dimensions," he began, and began to see the hopelessness of it. "They were left over after the Big Bang."

"I know what will interest you ladies," said her husband. And with another flourish, he touched the screen. "You'll be able to have this in your heads, whenever you want." Suddenly the screen was full of cream color. One of the capital's ladies spun on her high heel. She was wearing the best of the nation's fashion design. She was one of the ladies in Mae's secret treasure book.

"Oh!" breathed out Kwan. "Oh, Mae, look, isn't she lovely!"

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"This address shows nothing but fashion," said her husband.

"All the time?" Kwan exclaimed and looked back at Mae in wonder. For a moment, she stared up at the screen, her own face reflected over those of the models. Then, thankfully, she became Kwan again. "Doesn't that get boring?"

Her husband chuckled. "You can choose something else. Anything else."

It was happening very quickly and Mae's guts churned faster than her brain to certain knowledge: Kwan and her husband would be fine with all this.

"Look," he said. "You can even buy the dress."

Kwan shook her head in amazement. Then a voice said the price and Kwan gasped again. "Oh, yes, all I have to do is sell one of our four farms, and I can have a dress like that."

"I saw all that two years ago," said Mae. "It is too plain for the likes of us. We want people to see everything."

Kwan's face went sad. "That is because we are poor, back in the hills." It was the common yearning, the common forlorn knowledge. Sometimes it had to cease, all the business-making, you had to draw a breath, because after all, you had known your people for as long as you had lived.

Mae said, "None of them are as beautiful as you are, Kwan." It was true, except for her teeth.

"Flattery talk from a fashion expert," said Kwan lightly. But she took Mae's hand. Her eyes yearned up at the screen, as secret after secret was spilled like blood.

"With all this in our heads," said Kwan to her husband. "We won't need your TV."

It was a busy week.

It was not only the six dresses. For some reason, there was much extra business.

On Wednesday, Mae had a discreet morning call to make on Tsang Muhammad. She liked Tsang, she was like a peach that was overripe, round and soft to the touch and very slightly wrinkled. Tsang loved to lie back and be pampered, but only did it when she had an assignation. Everything about Tsang was off-kilter. She was Chinese with a religious

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Karz husband, who was ten years her senior. He was a Muslim who allowed, or perhaps could not prevent, his Chinese wife from keeping a family pig.

The family pig was in the front room being fattened. Half of the room was full of old shucks. The beast looked lordly and pleased with itself. Tsang's four-year-old son sat tamely beside it, feeding it the greener leaves, as if the animal could not find them for itself.

"Is it all right to talk?" Mae whispered, her eyes going sideways toward the boy.

Tsang, all plump smiles, nodded very quickly yes.

"Who is it?" Mae mouthed.

Tsang simply waggled a finger.

So it was someone they knew. Mae suspected it was Kwan's oldest boy, Luk. Luk was sixteen but fully grown, kept in pressed white shirt and shorts like a baby, but the shorts only showed he had hair on his football-player calves. His face was still round and soft and babylike but lately had been full of a new and different confusion.

"Tsang. Oh!" gasped Mae.

"Ssssh," giggled Tsang, who was red as a radish. As if either of them could be certain what the other one meant. "I need a repair job!" So it was someone younger.

Almost certainly Kwan's handsome son.

"Well, they have to be taught by someone," whispered Mae.

Tsang simply dissolved into giggles. She could hardly stop laughing.

"I can do nothing for you. You certainly don't need redder cheeks," said Mae.

Tsang uttered a squawk of laughter.

"There is nothing like it for a woman's complexion." Mae pretended to put away the tools of her trade. "No, I can affect no improvement. Certainly I cannot compete with the effects of a certain young man."

"Nothing...nothing," gasped Tsang. "Nothing like a good prick."

Mae howled in mock outrage, and Tsang squealed and both squealed and pressed down their cheeks, and shushed each other. Mae noted exactly which part of the cheeks were blushing so she would know where the color should go later.

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As Mae painted, Tsang explained how she escaped her husband's view. "I tell him that I have to get fresh garbage for the pig," whispered Tsang. "So I go out with the empty bucket...."

"And come back with a full bucket," said Mae airily.

"Oh!" Tsang pretended to hit her. "You are as bad as me!"

"What do you think I get up to in the City?" asked Mae, arched eyebrow, lying.

Love, she realized later, walking back down the track and clutching her cloth bag of secrets, love is not mine. She thought of the boy's naked calves.

On Thursday, Kwan wanted her teeth to be flossed. This was new; Kwan had never been vain before. This touched Mae, because it meant her friend was getting older. Or was it because she had seen the TV models with their impossible teeth? How were real people supposed to have teeth like that?

Kwan's handsome son ducked as he entered, wearing his shorts, showing smooth full thighs, and a secret swelling about his groin. He ducked as he went out again. Guilty, Mae thought. For certain it is him.

She laid Kwan's head back over a pillow with a towel under her.

Should she not warn her friend to keep watch on her son? Which friend should she betray? To herself, she shook her head; there was no possibility of choosing between them. She could only keep silent. "Just say if I hit a nerve," Mae said.

Kwan had teeth like an old horse, worn, brown, black. Her gums were scarred from a childhood disease, and her teeth felt loose as Mae rubbed the floss between them. She had a neat little bag into which she flipped each strand after it was used.

It was Mae's job to talk: Kwan could not. Mae said she did not know how she would finish the dresses in time. The girls' mothers were never satisfied, each wanted her daughter to have the best. Well, the richest would have the best in the end because they bought the best cloth. Oh! Some of them had asked to pay for the fabric later! As if Mae could afford to buy cloth for six dresses without being paid!

"They all think their fashion expert is a woman of wealth." Mae sometimes found the whole pretense funny. Kwan's eyes crinkled into a smile. But they were also moist from pain.

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It was hurting. "You should have told me your teeth were sore," said Mae, and inspected the gums. In the back, they were raw.

If you were rich, Kwan, you would have good teeth, rich people keep their teeth, and somehow keep them white, not brown. Mae pulled stray hair out of Kwan's face.

"I will have to pull some of them," Mae said quietly. "Not today, but soon."

Kwan closed her mouth and swallowed. "I will be an old lady," she said and managed a smile.

"A granny with a thumping stick."

"Who always hides her mouth when she laughs."

Both of them chuckled. "And thick glasses that make your eyes look like a fish."

Kwan rested her hand on her friend's arm. "Do you remember, years ago? We would all get together and make little boats, out of paper, or shells. And we would put candles in them, and send them out on the ditches."

"Yes!" Mae sat forward. "We don't do that anymore."

"We don't wear pillows and a cummerbund anymore either."

There had once been a festival of wishes every year, and the canals would be full of little glowing candles, that floated for a while and then sank with a hiss. "We would always wish for love," said Mae, remembering.

Next morning, Mae mentioned the candles to her neighbor Old Mrs. Tung. Mae visited her nearly every day. Mrs. Tung had been her teacher, during the flurry of what passed for Mae's schooling. She was ninety years old, and spent her days turned toward the tiny loft window that looked out over the valley. She was blind, her eyes pale and unfocused. She could see nothing through the window. Perhaps she breathed in the smell of the fields.

"There you are," Mrs. Tung would smile underneath the huge spectacles that did so little to improve her vision. She remembered the candles. "And we would roast pumpkin seeds. And the ones we didn't eat, we would turn into jewelry. Do you remember that?"

Mrs. Tung was still beautiful, at least in Mae's eyes. Mrs. Tung's face had grown even more delicate in extreme old age, like the skeleton of a cat,

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small and fine. She gave an impression of great merriment, by continually laughing at not very much. She repeated herself.

"I remember the day you first came to me," she said. Before Shen's village school, Mrs. Tung kept a nursery, there in their courtyard. "I thought: is that the girl whose father has been killed? She is so pretty. I remember you looking at all my dresses hanging on the line."

"And you asked me which one I liked best."

Mrs. Tung giggled. "Oh yes, and you said the butterflies."

Blindness meant that she could only see the past.

"We had tennis courts, you know. Here in Kizuldah."

"Did we?" Mae pretended she had not heard that before.

"Oh yes, oh yes. When the Chinese were here, just before the Communists came. Part of the Chinese army was here, and they built them. We all played tennis, in our school uniforms."

The Chinese officers had supplied the tennis rackets. The traces of the courts were broken and grassy, where Mr. Pin now ran his car repair business.

"Oh! They were all so handsome, all the village girls were so in love." Mrs. Tung chuckled. "I remember, I couldn't have been more than ten years old, and one of them adopted me, because he said I looked like his daughter. He sent me a teddy bear after the war." She chuckled and shook her head. "I was too old for teddy bears by then. But I told everyone it meant we were getting married. Oh!" Mrs. Tung shook her head at foolishness. "I wish I had married him," she confided, feeling naughty. She always said that.

Mrs. Tung even now had the power to make Mae feel calm and protected. Mrs. Tung had come from a family of educated people and once had a house full of books. The books had all been lost in a flood many years ago, but Mrs. Tung could still recite to Mae the poems of the Turks, the Karz, the Chinese. She had sat the child Mae on her lap, and rocked her. She could still recite now, the same poems.

"Listen to the reed flute," she began now, *"How it tells a tale!"* Her old blind face swayed with the words, the beginning of *The Mathnawi*. *"This noise of the reed is fire, it is not the wind."*

Mae yearned. "Oh. I wish I remembered all those poems!" When she saw Mrs. Tung, she could visit the best of her childhood.

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On Friday, Mae saw the Ozdemirs.

The mother was called Hatijah, and her daughter was Sezen. Hatijah was a shy, flighty little thing, terrified of being overcharged by Mae, and of being under-served. Hatijah's low, old stone house was tangy with the smells of burning charcoal, sweat, dung, and the constantly stewing tea. From behind the house came a continual, agonized lowing: the family cow, neglected, needed milking. The poor animal's voice was going raw and harsh. Hatijah seemed not to hear it. She ushered Mae in and fluttered around her, touching the fabric.

"This is such good fabric," Hatijah said, too frightened of Mae to challenge her. It was not good fabric, but good fabric cost real money. Hatijah had five children, and a skinny shiftless husband who probably had worms. Half of the main room was heaped up with corn cobs. The youngest of her babes wore only shirts and sat with their dirty naked bottoms on the corn.

Oh, this was a filthy house. Perhaps Hatijah was a bit simple. She offered Mae roasted corn. Not with your child's wet shit on it, thought Mae, but managed to be polite. The daughter, Sezen, stomped in barefoot for her fitting. Sezen was a tough, raunchy brute of girl and kept rolling her eyes at everything: at her nervous mother, at Mae's efforts to make the yellow and red dress hang properly, at anything either one of the adults said.

"Does...will...on the day...," Sezen's mother tried to begin.

Yes, thought Mae with some bitterness, on the day Sezen will finally have to wash. Sezen's bare feet were slashed with infected cuts.

"What my mother means is," Sezen said. "Will you make up my face Saturday?" Sezen blinked, her unkempt hair making her eyes itch.

"Yes, of course," said Mae, curtly to a younger person who was forward.

"What, with all those other girls on the same day? For someone as lowly as us?"

The girl' s eyes were angry. Mae pulled in a breath.

"No one can make you feel inferior without you agreeing with them first," said Mae. It was something Old Mrs. Tung had once told Mae when she herself was poor, hungry, and famished for magic.

"Take off the dress," Mae said. "I'll have to take it back for finishing."

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Sezen stepped out of it, right there, naked on the dirt floor. Hatijah did not chastise her, but offered Mae tea. Because she had refused the corn, Mae had to accept the tea. At least that would be boiled.

Hatijah scuttled off to the black kettle and her daughter leaned back in full insolence, her supposedly virgin pubes plucked as bare as the baby's bottom.

Mae fussed with the dress, folding it, so she would have somewhere else to look. The daughter just stared. Mae could take no more. "Do you want people to see you? Go put something on!"

"I don't have anything else," said Sezen.

Her other sisters had gone shopping in the town for graduation gifts. They would have taken all the family's good dresses.

"You mean you have nothing else you will deign to put on." Mae glanced at Hatijah: she really should not be having to do this woman's work for her. "You have other clothes, old clothes. Put them on."

The girl stared at her in even greater insolence.

Mae lost her temper. "I do not work for pigs. You have paid nothing so far for this dress. If you stand there like that I will leave, now, and the dress will not be yours. Wear what you like to the graduation. Come to it naked like a whore for all I care."

Sezen turned and slowly walked toward the side room.

Hatijah the mother still squatted over the kettle, boiling more water to dilute the stew of leaves. She lived on tea and burnt corn that was more usually fed to cattle. Her cow's eyes were averted. Untended, the family cow was still bellowing.

Mae sat and blew out air from stress. This week! She looked at Hatijah's dress. It was a patchwork assembly of her husband's old shirts, beautifully stitched. Hatijah could sew. Mae could not. Hatijah would know that; it was one of the things that made the woman nervous. With all these changes, Mae was going to have to find something else to do beside sketch photographs of dresses. She had a sudden thought.

"Would you be interested in working for me?" Mae asked. Hatijah looked fearful and pleased and said she would have to ask her husband.

Everything is going to have to change, thought Mae, as if to convince herself.

* * *

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That night Mae worked nearly to dawn on the other three dresses. Her racketing sewing machine sat silent in the corner. It was fine for rough work, but not for finishing, not for graduation dresses.

The bare electric light glared down at her like a headache, as Mae's husband Joe snored. Above them in the loft, his brother and father snored too, as they had done for twenty years.

Mae looked into Joe's open mouth like a mystery. When he was sixteen Joe had been handsome, in the context of the village, wild, and clever. They'd been married a year when she first went to Yeshibozkay with him, where he worked between harvests building a house. She saw the clever city man, an acupuncturist who had money. She saw her husband bullied, made to look foolish, asked questions for which he had no answer. The acupuncturist made Joe do the work again. In Yeshibozkay, her handsome husband was a dolt.

Here they were, both of them now middle-aged. Their son Vikram was a major in the Army. They had sent him to Balshang. He mailed them parcels of orange skins for potpourri; he sent cards and matches in picture boxes. He had met some city girl. Vik would not be back. Their daughter Lily lived on the other side of Yeshibozkay, in a bungalow with a toilet. Life pulled everything away.

At this hour of the morning, she could hear their little river, rushing down the steep slope to the valley. Then a door slammed in the North End. Mae knew who it would be: their Muerain, Mr. Shenyalar. He would be walking across the village to the mosque. A dog started to bark at him; Mrs. Doh's, by the bridge.

Mae knew that Kwan would be cradled in her husband's arms and that Kwan was beautiful because she was an Eloi tribeswoman. All the Eloi had fine features. Her husband Wing did not mind and no one now mentioned it. But Mae could see Kwan shiver now in her sleep. Kwan had dreams, visions, she had tribal blood and it made her shift at night as if she had another, tribal life.

Mae knew that Kwan's clean and noble athlete son would be breathing like a moist baby in his bed, cradling his younger brother.

Without seeing them, Mae could imagine the moon and clouds over their village. The moon would be reflected shimmering on the water of the irrigation canals which had once borne their paper boats of wishes.

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There would be old candles, deep in the mud.

Then, the slow, sad voice of their Muerain began to sing. Even amplified, his voice was deep and soft, like pillows that allowed the unfaithful to sleep. In the byres, the lonely cows would be stirring. The beasts would walk themselves to the town square, for a lick of salt, and then wait to be herded to pastures. In the evening, they would walk themselves home. Mae heard the first clanking of a cowbell.

At that moment something came into the room, something she did not want to see, something dark and whole like a black dog with froth around its mouth that sat in her corner and would not go away, nameless yet.

Mae started sewing faster.

The dresses were finished on time, all six, each a different color.

Mae ran barefoot in her shift to deliver them. The mothers bowed sleepily in greeting. The daughters were hopping with anxiety like water on a skillet.

It all went well. Under banners the children stood together, including Kwan's son Luk, Sezen, all ten children of the village, all smiles, all for a moment looking like an official poster of the future, brave, red-cheeked with perfect teeth.

Teacher Shen read out each of their achievements. Sezen had none, except in animal husbandry, but she still collected her certificate to applause. And then Mae's friend Shen did something special.

He began to talk about a friend to all of the village, who had spent more time on this ceremony than anyone else, whose only aim was to bring a breath of beauty into this tiny village, the seamstress who worked only to adorn other people....

He was talking about her.

...one was devoted to the daughters and mothers of rich and poor alike and who spread kindness and good will.

The whole village was applauding her, under the white clouds, the blue sky. All were smiling at her. Someone, Kwan perhaps, gave her a push from behind and she stumbled forward.

And her friend Shen was holding out a certificate for her.

"In our day, Lady Chung," he said, "there were no schools for the likes

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of us, not after early childhood. So. This is a graduation certificate for you. From all your friends. It is in Fashion Studies."

There was applause. Mae tried to speak and found only fluttering sounds came out, and she saw the faces, ranged all in smiles, friends and enemies, cousins and no kin alike.

"This is unexpected," she finally said, and they all chuckled. She looked at the high-school certificate, surprised by the power it had, surprised that she still cared about her lack of education. She couldn't read it. "I do not do fashion as a student, you know."

They knew well enough that she did it for money and how precariously she balanced things.

Something stirred, like the wind in the clouds.

"After tomorrow, you may not need a fashion expert. After tomorrow, everything changes. They will give us TV in our heads, all the knowledge we want. We can talk to the President. We can pretend to order cars from Tokyo. We'll all be experts." She looked at her certificate, hand-lettered, so small.

Mae found she was angry, and her voice seemed to come from her belly, an octave lower.

"I'm sure that it is a good thing. I am sure the people who do this think they do a good thing. They worry about us, like we were children." Her eyes were like two hearts, pumping furiously. "We don't have time for TV or computers. We face sun, rain, wind, sickness, and each other. It is good that they want to help us." She wanted to shake her certificate, she wished it was one of them, who had upended everything. "But how dare they? How dare they call us have-nots?"

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

The Amber Spyglass, by Philip Pullman, Knopf, 2000, $19.95.

I'VE COME down a little hard on the first two volumes of this trilogy in previous columns (you can find those reviews in the January 1997 and December 1997 issues, archived on line at www.fsfmag.com). My complaints were general (I hate how a big story has to be pulled into separate volumes that don't stand on their own, each volume published sometimes years apart) and specific (the motivation of the characters appeared to grow from the story's needs, rather than from the characters themselves, and there was no real character growth).

But there's obviously something I like about these books, because here I am reviewing *The Amber Spyglass*, the third and final in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. I'll get to what that is in a moment, but first a little backstory to give those unfamiliar with the books a chance to catch up:

The Golden Compass was where we first met Lyra Belacqua, a wild child raised by scholars in another world, like ours and yet unlike. As Lyra traveled from Oxford to London, into the fenlands and then north through Scandinavia, half the fun was separating the bits of our world from those Pullman had made up. Gyptians (Gypsies), witches, a Texan balloonist, and other half-familiar characters contrasted nicely with more exotic creatures like the armored bears of the frozen north, and Pullman proved to be delightfully inventive with elements such as his alethiometer, a kind of mechanical Tarot (the "compass" of the title), and the shape-changing animal companions every human being has that come across as something between a pet, a friend, and a witch's familiar.

At the end of *The Golden Compass*, Lyra found herself traveling

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from her world into another in search of the killer of her friend Roger. In *The Subtle Knife* we discover that the new world she has entered is ours.

The second volume also introduces a major new protagonist in Will Parry, a twelve-year-old boy who is beginning his own quest to find his long-lost father, the explorer John Parry who disappeared many years before the novel opens. He and Lyra meet within the first few chapters, and circumstances quickly have them join forces.

By book three, *The Amber Spyglass* which is under consideration here, there is a war in heaven that has spread across the many worlds and Will and Lyra, as well as all the other characters, are caught up in the middle of it. There are so many different worlds and characters to keep track of that I highly recommend you go and read the first two books if you haven't already. I also don't want to tell you too much about the plot because it'll give away elements you should be allowed to discover for yourself — not only in this book, but in the previous two as well.

However, I will say that my main specific complaint with the first two books has been more than ably addressed in this last volume. While there are still some characters lacking depth and motivation beyond the requirements of the story (this character is bad because we need a bad character here, this one's good), all of the major characters have undergone a...I want to say transformation, but that's not quite the right word. What Pullman has done is he's deepened their characters, mixed up the whites and blacks of their make-up to allow for more gray. As I read this last volume I could no longer be sure of what anybody would do, and the ending of this book is superb — realistic, played fair, and bittersweet.

The previous books were some-

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what light fare — event-driven adventure stories, strengthened by Pullman's delightful prose and inventive imagination when it comes to other worlds, the races that populate them, curious artifacts, and the like. *The Amber Spyglass* continues those positive elements and is still a page-turner, but also displays a remarkable depth that has turned it — at least in my mind — from an entertaining series into a favorite one, mostly on the strength of this concluding volume.

And I loved the way he was able to address some serious and large ideas without ever giving the reader the sense of being lectured. While I'm sure it will annoy certain people, this idea that the world we live in now is the "republic of heaven," that we should treat this life as though it is all we have, and enjoy ourselves, and appreciate it appropriately, is worth our consideration.

In a recent interview Pullman is quoted as saying about this series that he "wanted to emphasize the simple physical truth of things, the absolute primacy of material life, rather than the spiritual or the afterlife." In other words, don't wait for your rewards on the other side of death, but take and give them now.

This is eloquently and beautifully conveyed in *The Amber Spyglass*, and he's doing it all within a YA fantasy trilogy. Talk about subversive.

His Dark Materials is eminently suitable for adult audiences. But it's also a series you can hand the younger readers in your lives when they've run out of J. K. Rowling, Diana Wynne Jones, and Lloyd Alexander books, but still hunger for more.

Stolen from Gypsies, by Noble Smith, Aubrey House, 2000, $23.95.

Fans of William Goldman's classic *The Princess Bride* will certainly get a kick out of this novel. Like Goldman's book, this is a story told within a story, although in this case, rather than a modern father telling the "good parts" version of a bedtime story to his son, the narrator lives in the early 19th century: he's a sickly author relating the tale to his bumbling servant who constantly interrupts the story, resulting in amusing conversations between the two and short digressions into other stories.

But what a tale the principal storyline is: A stolen Gypsy child. Star-crossed lovers. Villainous uncles. Pirates and highwaymen. Demons and duels. And then there are the stipulations attached to the protagonist's rescue from a curse:

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whether he wants it or not, he must answer an insult with an insult; when someone weeps, he must weep with them; and when he is in the presence of his true love, he is unable to speak anything but unintelligible nonsense.

There are more interruptions than there were in *The Princess Bride*, and if my memory serves me correctly, *Stolen from Gypsies* is certainly bawdier, but it's just as funny and charming, and not at all derivative. I use Goldman's book only as a touchstone. While *Stolen from Gypsies* also has echoes of Shakespeare, old Childe ballads, and *Cyrano de Bergerac*, not to mention Monty Python, in the end, it lies in some mad classification all its own.

The Heidelberg Cylinder, by Jonathan Carroll, Mobius New Media, 2000, $25.

Anyone familiar from other books with the quirky way Carroll's mind works will immediately appreciate the setup in this novella: what if the people who come peddling enlightenment and truth door-to-door actually have an inside track on how the universe works? And what happens if you decide to go along with them, to view the "proof" they can offer?

I'm not going to tell you anything more for fear of spoiling surprises, but suffice it to say that Carroll does a wonderful job setting up the premise and then playing it out. His prose, quirkiness, and wit are all in top form here.

It's too bad the same can't be said about the production values of this little volume. The cover by Dave McKean is gorgeous and well-designed, but things immediately fall apart inside. The binding is terrible and the tiny text looks like a double-spaced manuscript with a justified right side. Words are underlined for emphasis, rather than set in italics. The copyright page is in an odd place as well.

All of which is too bad, as the story is wonderful and deserving of a much more attractive presentation than this. Especially at the price one is paying for it. I hope it will be reprinted in some collection, anthology, or magazine in the near future.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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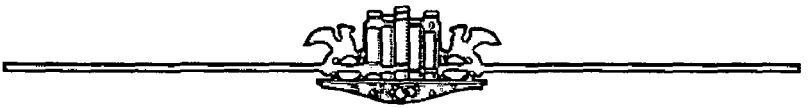

BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

A Saucer of Loneliness, Volume VII: The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon, ed. Paul Williams, North Atlantic Books, November, 2000, $30.

Selected Stories, by Theodore Sturgeon, Vintage Books, October, 2000, $13.

WHEN, IN the sixties, as a new writer in the field, I spoke to others, Chip Delany, say, or Mike Moorcock, about the writers we most admired, a common handful of names bobbed to the surface. Alfred Bester, Cordwainer Smith, Fritz Leiber, Phil Farmer, Phil Dick. In each case there'd be electric sparks jumping between us *(Remember...that scene...the way he...)* like massive neurons firing. Then one or the other of us would mention Sturgeon, and silence would fall. In respect, certainly, but something more as well. It was almost as though we realized that whatever we said, whatever words we found, would be pale imitations of what Sturgeon had done.

> *If she's dead, I thought, I'll never find her in this white flood of moonlight on the white sea, with the surf seething in and over the pale, pale sand like a great shampoo. Almost always, suicides who stab themselves or shoot themselves in the heart carefully bare their chests; the same strange impulse generally makes the sea-suicide go naked.*

These past weeks I've been spending time in company with one of my oldest friends, a man so deeply embedded in my life that, were his many presences there torn away, I myself well might begin to fade — a man I never met. I read Vintage Books' excellent *Selected Stories* in a single sitting, reread two or three favorite novels, shuffled again and again through my stack of worn

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paperbacks, dipping in and out like a hummingbird. Then, after looking back over earlier volumes in Paul Williams's ongoing, heroic project to restore to print all of Sturgeon's stories, I turned to this latest, seventh volume.

What most surprises me is recognizing how many times I've read many of these stories, two dozen times or more, some of them, in the forty-five years that Sturgeon and I have been traveling companions.

By contrast, one of them, "The Education of Drusilla Strange," I read but once, again some forty-plus years ago, yet remember as vividly as if it were last week. This story I found to be scored so deeply within me that I didn't so much read as remember it, in much the same way that I might recall events or experiences from my own life. And that, perhaps more than anything, gives the measure of Sturgeon's particular genius.

> *The prison ship, under full shields, slipped down toward the cove, and made no shadow on the moonlit water, and no splash as it slid beneath the surface. They put her out and she swam clear, and the ship nosed up and silently fled. Two wavelets clapped hands softly, once, and that was the total mark the ship made on the prison wall.*

There are writers who throughout their careers with a certain relentlessness pursue the same themes again and again, forever refining, restating terms, purifying tone and attack, honing the edge. Years ago in a *New Yorker* interview Alberto Moravia remarked of such writers that "Their truth is self-repeating. They keep rewriting the same book...trying to perfect their expression of the one problem they were born to understand." Glib perhaps, but in large part true. And especially true, I think, of highly individualistic writers, those who work within a genre, for instance, yet are always pushing the envelope (and often, as well, the postbox into which they drop it) toward some new reach and hold. Their aesthetic goal comes to seem, and in some respects no doubt is, a search for personal transformation.

In a wonderful essay on Richard Yates for the *Boston Review*, Stewart O'Nan pointed out that among the many obligations we assume as writers is the imperative to do whatever we can to preserve the work of those who came before us, to see that it's not forgotten. This is a charge Paul Williams, with

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his crusade to ransom Sturgeon's stories, has taken to heart, one which now, in my own small way, I'd like to second.

More than anyone else, Theodore Sturgeon taught me to write. And long before that, before I even knew it, I think, he made me want to *be* a writer.

When I first encountered it, Sturgeon's work affected me in ways no other had. I could not throw off stories like "The Other Celia," "Bright Segment," "The Professor's Teddy Bear," "Scars." They followed me around, floated toward me on the night's dark oil, stalked me. And when, about 1964, I began seriously trying to write fiction, it was to Sturgeon that I turned. I sat in the student union of the university I'd not so much dropped out of as evaporated from, and read compulsively, over and over again, everything of the man's I could find. *More Than Human, The Dreaming Jewels, Some of Your Blood, The Cosmic Rape.* And stories: "The Man Who Lost the Sea," "Cellmate," "A Saucer of Loneliness," "And Now the News." Trying to see how he did it. Trying to understand how he went about making his characters so real, how he brought these made-up worlds into such vivid focus. And just how it was that he managed to affect me so.

In an introduction to Volume II of the complete Sturgeon stories, Chip Delany recounts reading "Thunder and Roses" at age ten or eleven, recalling his fascination at the manner in which Sturgeon paced characters through all sorts of "ordinary things like shaving and taking showers" making it all so much more vivid than seemed possible, describing "the feel of warm water down your neck" and the crumpled tube of toothpaste on the shelf while all along, outside, the characters' world was coming to an end.

That a writer should uncompromisingly, in stories of the fantastic, set out to memorialize quotidian life and language seems at first a paradox; in fact, it's the engine of Sturgeon's art. Such grafting of the extraordinary onto the ordinary lies at the very heart of what he does. He sweeps up the textures of momentary life (the only life we ever truly know, after all, however bolstered or diluted it may be by memory and anticipation) and tucks them into something far larger. His beloved halfwits, though sanctioned from it, live embedded in the common society. That common society is itself but one of many echoes, some audible, some faint, of *all* societies: historical societies, future societies, possible societies. Loving humanity, loving his mis-

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fits and miscreants perhaps most of all, so intimately aligned with his characters that he tells their stories from the inside, nonetheless Sturgeon stands forever apart, seeing the *should* and *could be* in the *is.* Seeing through to the other side of that *is,* as well. Saying again and again, with Rimbaud, that everything we are taught is false. Believing with Valery that "A work of art should always teach us that we have not seen what we see."

Further along in that same introduction, Delany wrote:

"Sturgeon wanted a world that worked differently from the one we live in; and that difference was that it had a place for love and logic both. What seemed to bolster him and give him personal patience and also artistic perseverance was his apprehension of the interconnectedness of all life's varied and variegated aspects."

This, too, comes close to central concerns. For Sturgeon not only retrieves and holds in suspension those aspects of life we take so much for granted — patterns of apprehension, textures of mundane life, what philosophers call *dailyness* — he also taps directly into that sense we all have of the connectedness of things, that sense of something *more,* something transcendent, at the core of our consciousness.

Sturgeon wanted "a world that worked differently," Delany remarks, thereby introducing another aspect of the man. There was about him an element of contrariety investing all he did. Sadly for all of us, and for Ted Sturgeon most of all, that contrariety was not always a positive thing. It allowed him as writer to see things anew, to look through from the other side, as it were — to cast aside received wisdom, almost without effort, for that adversary intent Lionel Trilling holds to be at the heart of all great art — but it also occasioned great personal difficulties, gravely interfered with his career and disrupted his life, let him judas-goat himself into horrendous writing blocks.

In a 1976 profile, Paul Williams noted:

"Ted told me he'd been hearing this voice inside him all his life which says, in response to whatever is or seems to be expected of him by the outside world, 'I won't do it.' Only recently, he said, he's realized that there's another half to the sentence, and what he's really saying, deep in there somewhere, is, 'I won't do what *they want me* to do.'"

Something of the eternal adolescent, then, unwilling or unable to accept the world as it is, striking out,

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often with the clear, Rimbaudian brilliance of the young, other times in blind, insensate fury, when the world will not be as he wants it to be.

The moralist, the idealist — and Sturgeon was both — feels deeply the loss of what he, what the world, has never had. That sense of loss everywhere in Sturgeon is almost Miltonic. His characters, like Drusilla exiled here to this backwards, prison planet Earth, represent, remember, or envision other, finer existences. ("...Earth, which was her world falsified; and the endless music, which was her world in truth...") Though often stunted by circumstance, history, heredity, and convention, they are people capable of greatness: the near-morons of "Bright Segment," *The Cosmic Rape* and *More Than Human*, supermen-unaware like Horty in *The Dreaming Jewels*, or the fabulous inventor-songwriter-sculptor-poet-genius of "Maturity." Loners and outcasts all.

All of them, too, to some degree, self-portraits.

In *A Saucer of Loneliness*, this book so filled with amazements, the most amazing thing of all might easily go overlooked. It shows up in the Editor's Note: "This seventh volume contains stories written between autumn 1952 and autumn 1953." That in one calendar year a single writer could publish so many outstanding stories, stories such as "...And My Fear Is Great...," "The Wages of Synergy," "A Way of Thinking," "Mr. Costello, Hero," "The World Well Lost," "The Touch of Your Hand," stories of such excellence as would support any other writer's entire career, is astonishing. His first novel, *The Dreaming Jewels*, had come out in 1950; *More Than Human* appeared in book form in 1953. Stories like "The [Widget], the [Wadget], and Boff," "To Here and the Easel" and "Hurricane Trio" waited just around the corner.

> *Yancey, who had once been killed, lay very still with his arm flung across the pillow, and watched the moonlight play with the color of Beverly's hair.... The waves blundered into the cliff below, hooting through the sea-carved boulders, frightening great silver ghosts of spray out and up into the torn and noisy air.... He wished he could sleep. For two years he had been glad he did not sleep.*

Art, like great conversation, contrives to rescue us from the commonplace, to break through the crust of habit and routine and let us

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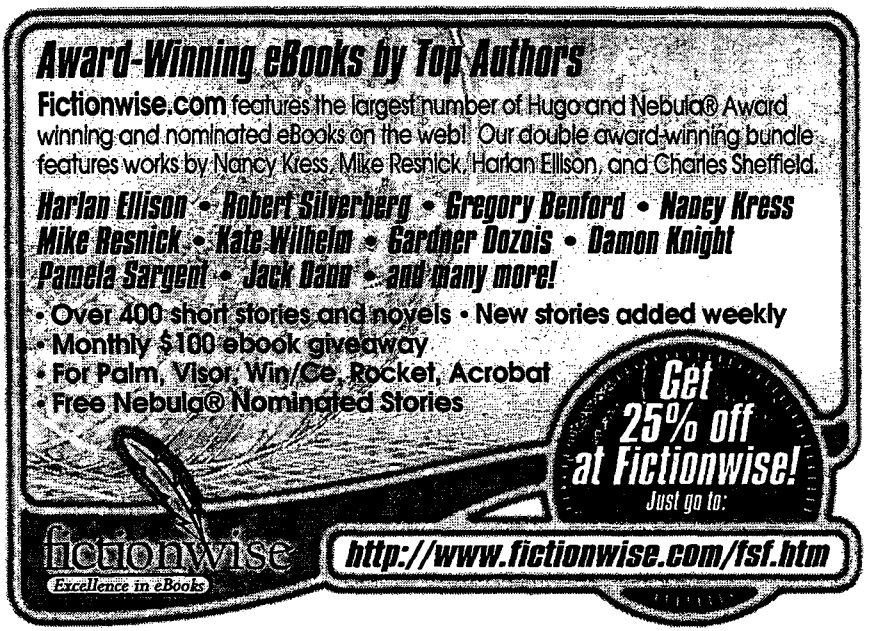
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see anew, feel anew — to make our world large again.

This is something I first learned at age twelve, sitting on a screened porch half a mile away from Huck's Mississippi with Jimmy Reed and Hank Williams spilling from the jukebox at the drive-in just down the road. And it wasn't from William Faulkner or Robert Browning or James Joyce that I learned it (though I was reading them all), but from Theodore Sturgeon. I realize it again each time I go back to him. What better reason to *keep* going back?

Theodore Sturgeon is among the finest writers this country has produced. He is, like all great writers, all great artists, absolutely one of a kind, sui generis. We can only hope that, with time, with crusading efforts such as Paul Williams's, he might come to receive the approbations due him. Meanwhile, he remains an intimate part of many of us.

Sturgeon's stories are pokers stirring the coals of our lives and feelings back to flame. They are, each of them, anthems of praise and wonder sung by one small cell to the larger organism, to Life.

The Imagination is not a State, Blake wrote: it is the Human Existence itself.

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Michael Nethercott's first appearance in our pages was a little hard-to-forget piece called "The Beastly Red Lurker" back in our August 1999 issue. He lives in New England and notes that most of his published works have been in magazines for young readers, such as Cobblestone, Hopscotch, *and* Plays—The Drama Magazine for Young People. *This new story reminds us that many of those things we found impressive in our youths relied heavily on illusion...or did they?*

The Moonshriek Dialogue

By Michael Nethercott

"BARABBAS FLECTOR?"

"Yes?"

"*The* Barabbas Flector who hosted Moonshriek Theater, Channel 10, 1959 to 1961?"

"Do *other* Barabbas Flectors walk the Earth?"

"Not that I've seen, sir."

"Then, what do you want from me, young man?"

"Just some of your time and memories." Warren slid a small tape recorder out from his trench coat pocket and extended it toward the elderly man in the doorway. "I'd like to preserve you for posterity, Mr. Flector. You're a classic."

Barabbas snickered. "I'm a colonic, is more like it these damn days. The old workings are not what they once were. You're the reporter from that science magazine, yes? Your editor called me a week ago. What took you so long to come?"

"I've been completely pumped to do you. I mean, you're almost a hero of mine. But, well, we had an emergency interview."

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"Emergency interview?"

"A man who claims he's the reincarnation of H.G. Wells scheduled a last minute exhibition of his time machine."

"A last minute time machine," sniffed Barabbas. "Fancy that. And did it work?"

"Well, he entered it wearing a lab coat and emerged seconds later in only a loin cloth, so we think it may be genuine."

Barabbas narrowed his eyes. "And *what* reputable periodical did you say you represented?"

Warren puffed up his chest. "*Naked Imaginings, the Magazine of Rabid Speculation.*"

"Let's make this a *brief* interview, shall we?"

"Oh, uh, sure, Mr. Flector. But there's so much to cover in your career."

"What career?" grumbled Barabbas as he gestured Warren into the small, dim living room. "A fleeting go at Shakespeare, a few bit parts in B movies, then three years as a sci-fi fright host, followed by three decades living off sporadic real estate deals. Cap that off with the present bout of old age and inertia, and your readership should be quite dazzled." He lowered himself onto a sagging sofa as Warren took the chair opposite.

The reporter set his recorder upon an intervening coffee table. "We'll just focus on the Moonshriek Era. Okay by you, Mr. Flector?"

Barabbas laughed dryly. "The Moonshriek *Era*? Why not the Moonshriek *Epoch*? Please don't limit your grandiosity on my account."

"Epoch? Hey, that's good." Warren bent over the recorder and spoke to his future self, "Note: Use 'Moonshriek Epoch' in article."

The older man sighed. "Ah, the cause of higher journalism has been served. Now, let's get this over with, shall we?"

"Sure enough, Mr. Flector, but first I'd just like to say a little something I prepared." The reporter closed his eyes in forced concentration and chanted: "Your hostmanship defined the futuristic dreams of a generation. Garbed in your shiny space shorts and oversized, triangular sunglasses, you elevated a pedestrian time slot featuring science fiction and monster movie reruns to a new plateau of post-modern artistry. You were tingly, yet tender. I have devoured all your existing footage. It is my

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deepest regret that I was born fifteen years after you were canceled." The eyes popped back open.

"A liberal arts degree can be a terrible thing," said Barabbas under his breath.

"Sir?"

"The interview. Just get on with the interview."

"Certainly. So, how did you land the gig in the first place?"

Barabbas smiled grimly. "The actor originally hired showed up blind drunk and bit a key grip. I was in the next-door studio doing a laxative commercial, though in those days we couldn't say 'laxative,' so we had to call it an 'after-meal propulsion tablet.' I was hastily recruited to replace my sotted colleague, and thus claimed my rightful place in the golden age of television. A stirring tale, no?"

"Yes! Now, let's talk a bit about your space devices. The Aero-disk, for example — "

"Merely a dog food bowl wrapped in aluminum foil."

"Oh. Well, then the Molecule Dissipator — "

"A bunch of eggbeaters fastened to a pogo stick."

"The Ultra Radar Rocket — "

"An umbrella covered in pie tins with a blowtorch strapped to the handle. Pathetic. You could get away with any bloody thing back then. The magic of television."

"It doesn't matter," said the unflappable Warren. "The Radar Rocket was awesome!"

Barabbas groaned. "In my day, the word 'awesome' was reserved for Mesopotamian temples and level twelve earthquakes. It's certainly taken on an air of underachievement since then."

"But my very favorite thing about Moonshriek Theater," confided Warren, "besides you, I mean — was that adorable little — "

"Don't say it — "

"Doopy — "

"Oh God."

"The Galactic Monkey."

"Damn his eternal soul."

"Pardon, sir?"

"Nothing."

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"Cute little Doopy the Galactic Monkey. Unfortunately, he passed away before my time. I truly feel that his death robbed my own generation of a national treasure. You're so lucky to have known him."

"Blessed," hissed Barabbas. "I was blessed."

"Was he...was he...?"

"Awesome? Oh, but yes. The way he transferred his jungle passion to my exposed shins was tingly yet tender. I wish, indeed, that it was *you* who knew Doopy...and not I."

"That's very kind of you to say, sir. It must have been hard for you when you heard he was killed in that skiing accident."

"Simply devastating," agreed Barabbas. "To this day, I can't gaze upon a simian without dry-heaving."

Warren nodded sympathetically. "I won't dwell on your sorrow. Now, you know, of course, what our readers will be clamoring to find out about..." He leaned forward and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial hush: "The Valentine Equation."

Barabbas shifted uneasily on his cushion. "There was nothing to that. Nothing at all."

"The facts are legend," insisted his guest. "On the episode broadcast live for Valentine's Day, 1961, you read aloud to the camera a long, complex mathematical sequence punctuated with high-pitched yelps. The equation was inscribed on a metallic object that resembled a hand mirror ridged with corkscrews. Throughout the viewing region, there were reports of inexplicable blackouts, seizures, and dementia among those who'd been watching Moonshriek Theater. By the next week, the show had a new host — Robotman Bob — and you were gone from the industry."

"There is no way you could have seen that episode."

"Of course not," admitted Warren. "It's common knowledge that no tape of it was saved. But the story has been passed down orally...like some Viking epic. So, level with me — just what was that object and where'd you get it from?"

"From the prop room. Just another cheap prop." Barabbas stood abruptly. "I think you've utterly plumbed the depths of my memory. Nothing more to be had. Good-bye."

"But we were just — "

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"What? Do you need more gossip? Very well: Robotman Bob was a transvestite; favored tin garter belts. There, you have your story. Now, hurry off and write it."

A sudden hardness came over Warren's features. "No," he said.

"*No*? What do you mean *no*? I just announced that this interview is — "

"I want that object." Warren switched off his tape recorder. "My sources say you still have it. Listen, Mr. Flector, I'm one of the hungry new breed of hard-core journalists who'll do anything to ferret out the truth. Plus, there are certain individuals who'll pay very nicely if I deliver your whatzit to them. It's not easy making a living in this business, you know. I'm not leaving empty-handed."

"Oh, really?" Barabbas arched his eyebrows. "It's such a fine line between tenacious reporting and thuggish robbery, isn't it? And what sort of 'individuals' have commissioned you to this task?"

"Um...I'm not completely sure, but they wear very narrow ties and have accents."

"They sound formidable. What kind of accents? Tennessee drawl? Scandinavian singsong? Or perhaps broad Portuguese syllables with a hint of Cantonese."

Warren scowled. "Don't toy with me." He rose and stepped close to Barabbas. "I'd sure hate to have something awful happen to a living icon like yourself."

The older man giggled. "Did you scour some cheap hard-boiled novel to find that line? Something with a title like *My Broad Is Deadly*? Or perhaps *A Bullet Named Moe*?"

"Stop babbling at me!"

"I see your respect for my 'post-modern artistry' knows no bounds. Will you pummel what you want out of me? Is that your pithy little plan?"

"I...Want...That...Object." Warren punctuated each word with a hard finger on his companion's chest.

Barabbas staggered backward. "Enough! All right, you preposterous whelp, I'll give you what you want. Come."

He led the way down the hall into a tiny side room overrun with clutter. From atop a buried desk, he lifted an old potato chip bag and tossed it into Warren's hands. The reporter stood dumbfounded for a moment, then reached inside and pulled out a small, heavy clump of fused metal.

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"What — ? How — ?"

"Ask and ye shall receive," said Barabbas. "My reading of the so-called Valentine Equation apparently overloaded the device. A half-hour after I left the studio, it began fizzling and smoking. Within minutes, it had melted down to its present form. Take it, my young conquistador, and trot on back to your foreign masters. Demand top dollar. Mission accomplished."

"But...but they won't like it."

"Sticks and stones can break your bones, but skinny-tied mystery men can't hurt you...hopefully."

With a low moan, Warren returned the clump to its bag and dropped it on the desk. He made his way sluggishly back toward the front door. Barabbas followed, maintaining an ugly smile.

Halfway through the threshold, Warren turned and faced his host. "At least tell me where you got it from.... Please."

"Aha!" beamed Barabbas. "Such cordiality from the press. Be still my heart. Sure, I'll tell you. Why not? I'm of an age where the Eternal Secret is nearly upon me. Why should I fret over the lesser ones?"

"Thank you, Mr. Flector," said Warren softly. "I really *am* a fan."

"It was Doopy, the Insufferable Celebrity Monkey."

"No!"

"Yes. He was dragging the device around backstage and shoved it at me just before my final on-camera. I wrongly assumed that he'd swiped it from the prop room. He looked up at me with those unnerving little watery eyes, and somehow I felt compelled to read aloud the inscription to the whole damn East Coast. You know the rest."

"But where did *Doopy* get it?"

Barabbas shrugged. "Strange are the ways of galactic monkeys. So, there you have it: less, perhaps, than you sought; but considerably more than I've ever before revealed. Now, farewell."

The door banged shut, and Warren walked slowly to the street. Just as he reached his car, Barabbas reappeared on the front steps and called out to him.

"Wait! The part about Robotman Bob's garters...well, that was a lie. I just want to set the record straight."

Warren nodded. "I appreciate that, sir."

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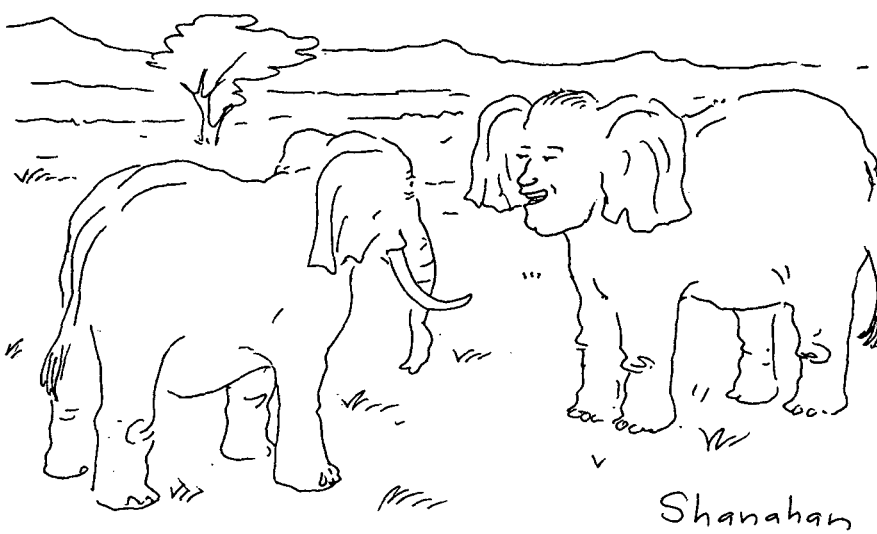
As he drove through the gathering twilight, the young reporter pondered his responsibilities, his regrets, and the high mysteries of life. On impulse, he pulled over alongside a large fenced-in meadow. Leaving his car, he vaulted the fence boards and made his way to the center of the field. There, alone, he fixed his gaze upon the swirling colors of the sunset sky. He stood motionless for a long time as the heavens went black and yielded up their bright, shimmering constellations.

He pulled out his tape recorder and spoke into it in a reverent tone: "On a night such as this, one can almost imagine a vast, perky monkey hopscotching across the distant stars. He seeks, perhaps, the sweet, dangling banana of a quarter moon; or maybe even more awesome amazements that our tiny, shriveled man-brains can barely grasp. He, indeed, is the very monkey of universal bafflement. He is scented with the splendors of the unknown, and he reeks of the inexplicable. His name, my friends, is...*Wonder*!"

Then, shifting his stance, Warren sank one foot ankle-deep into a huge, moist cowpie.



"Next week we do the ears."

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A denizen of Austin, Texas, Carrie Richerson says this story owes a great deal to Connie Willis, inveterate clipper of newspaper articles, and to Silver, for insightful and constructive criticism.

This tale is one of the most harrowing—and one of the most moving—to grace our pages in some time.

The Golden Chain

By Carrie Richerson

A GOLDEN CHILD. SUN-crowned and grace-kissed. Dancing down the sweet, endless, green-gold days of innocence. Eyes so blue, the breath caught in your throat with a sob to look into them, as you fell, and falling, looked again. Curls of spun gold, always blowing in a wind of her own passage, and laughter musical as fairy bells silvering the air behind. Apples did not blush prettier than her cheeks, nor was the ermine's fur softer and whiter than her skin.

Dancing and singing, merry and laughing all the long days, each one to wake to a new adventure, never a hurt or harm or loss — no, not to this child, pure and trusting of heart. She trusted her mummy, she trusted her daddy, she trusted life, which had never failed her.

She trusted God.

Alice died at 5:19 this morning. Thank God, it is finally over.

I have cried until I can't pull forth another tear, until my eyes feel boiled. I lie on my bed so exhausted, I don't have the energy to lift my face

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from where tears have glued it to the bedspread. I thought I was prepared for this. I thought I had done all my grieving in advance. We've known so long that this day was coming, we had so much time to prepare....

And still it hurts so much, I whimper with every gulp of air. It's a physical pain, this grief, this terrible, terrible loss. It feels like someone has put her hand inside my chest and squeezed my heart into a jagged shard of glass. All the plans we made, all the things I need to take care of now —I couldn't care less about them. Even Derek, much as he needs me now. I feel like I am dying, too. I will never survive this. *Alice, damn you! Why did you leave me!*

Lovely, so very lovely, lovely down the length of all her days: in the fresh green flush of springtime, shooting up like the young corn; growing tall and straight in the buzzing heat of summer; ringing clear and true in the sweet bronze voice of autumn. Wearing her youth with patience through the long winter, ripening in secret; and with spring come again, she bloomed for all the world to see.

She was "the prettiest little girl in the world" when they crowned her Princess of the May at the Holyoke Fair, and "a bright little star" when they set the tiara on her head at the Palomar Spring Festival. She was enshrined as "The Spirit of Peace" in a tableau on a float in the Endymion Krewe at New Orleans' Mardi Gras, and Little Miss Corn Queen at the Iowa State Fair.

She never used a jot of makeup, nor wore clothing that would make her look older than her tender years. Her beauty was all natural, never manipulated. Her mother and father fiercely protected her innocence, and never put pressure on her to compete. She was gracious to other contestants, always politely spoken, and humble in her victories. And when the judge reverently placed the small crown upon her golden hair in Las Vegas, and the emcee announced in a hushed voice that she was the new Little Miss America, all the nation fell in love with her.

I lean close to the screen to examine her. The camera loves her, it lingers in hungry close-up over those sparkling blue eyes, that wide, unforced smile. I trace the curves of her cheeks on the screen with my fingers until the static charge makes the hairs on my arm dance.

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"Can she be the one?" I murmur quietly. I don't want to wake Derek, who has finally fallen asleep in the bed beside me. He has had night terrors almost every night since his mother died, and I no longer even try to make him sleep in his own room.

Grief has worn him thin, silent, and sullen. He hates me for living on, when Alice has died. He hates himself for the same reason. Alice and I thought we had taken care of him; when we discovered her cancer, we were so glad I had already formally adopted Derek. But a child is living proof against perfect planning.

There is so much rage in Derek — at me, at Alice for leaving him, at the whole world for causing him this pain. Yesterday he attacked a Lego construction he had made with Alice in her last week. He slammed it to the floor, yanked it apart to its component bits, then tried to obliterate even the pieces by jumping and stamping on them. The whole time he was crying and howling with wordless outrage, until he fell in an exhausted heap and let me put him to bed.

He finds no comfort in me. He doesn't want me to touch him, to hold him. He used to enjoy hugs, giving and taking them without self-consciousness. Now he draws away, or stands rigidly tolerating the hateful act until it is over. Only here, in my bed, does he draw just close enough to take comfort from my warmth. And only when he is asleep like this do the lines in his too young face smooth out for a while.

He needs his mother.

So do I.

I turn back to the television. "Is she the one? Oh, Alice — how I wish you were here to tell me what to do!"

She wakes abruptly, certain that *something* is in the room with her. She is right: an inky shadow darker than the dimness in her room moves swiftly toward her. In that last moment, before the weight falls across her, pinning her to the bed, and the stinking cloth is clamped over her face, she opens her mouth to call for her mother, but nothing comes out. She is frozen in the moment of feeling something she has never felt before. She is feeling *fear*.

She wakes on something cold and hard. Her head hurts terribly, and

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she rolls to her side gagging up a thin, foul-tasting liquid. When the spasms stop, she sits up, wipes her mouth on her pajama sleeve, and shivers.

She is sitting on a concrete floor in a large, dim area. Hundreds of candles, stuck directly to the floor, surround her in a wide circle. Within the circle, there are lines and figures drawn on the floor: swirls, knots, angles of paint, chalk, and something dark and gritty like ashes. At the center of the chaos of color is a blue spiral, and she is at the center of the spiral. The cold air smells of dust and oil, like an old, unused furnace.

When she moves, a tiny metallic jingling draws her attention downward. A thin gold chain circles her right ankle and trails out of the circle of candles. The loop around her ankle is fastened to itself as though the links had been forged in place, and it will not slide down over her foot. When she jerks on the chain, it does not give an inch.

Around her, above her, she can feel an invisible pressure that holds her in the middle of the spiral. She tries to stand and cannot; she pushes against the air with her hands but it does not give. It is as if she were inside an invisible box, just larger than she is.

She is feeling *that* again — the tightness in her chest; the frozen knot in her throat that keeps her from calling for her mother or her father; the icy sensation in the pit of her stomach that makes her want to throw up. Like riding the roller coaster last summer, but not fun. Not fun at all. *I'm afraid.* She mouths the words with wonder. "I'm afraid," she whispers into the dimness. Nothing answers her. She hasn't felt this much like crying since she fell off her bike and skinned her knee, when she was six. And then her mummy kissed it and it felt enormously better.

She is cold and miserable; she is deeply scared for the first time in her life; but she is a big girl of eight now, and she will not cry. She curls into a ball on the cold floor and waits.

She is asleep when I come into the basement again. She has folded herself as tightly as possible into one corner of the space I have defined for her; she has been sick in the other corner. The candles give her face and golden hair a cherubic glow, but she is shivering on the cold floor.

It was not, it is not, my intention to be cruel. I take a blanket into her invisible cage and wrap it around her. She wakes while I am cleaning up

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the mess. I feel the sharpening of her attention behind me, and I hear the tiny sound of clenched panic she makes.

"Don't be afraid," I say, turning to face her. I show her that I have only a bucket and sponge, that I am only cleaning the floor. "I'm not going to hurt you." I want to believe that it is true, as much as I want her to believe it.

I take the bucket away and return with the photo album. "I have something for you to do," I say, sitting down outside her cage. "You're going to be a hero."

The child sees a middle-aged woman wearing worn jeans and a paint-spattered khaki shirt. Her hair is brown with lots of gray streaks, and is twisted up on her head in a messy bun. Her glasses do not hide the puffiness above her brown eyes, or the dark circles below them. She looks like some of the grandmothers the child has seen playing with laughing children in the park. It is hard to be afraid of her, but the child does not forget how she came here.

"I want to go home," the child says. She says it with as much calm and assurance as she can muster. She has faced crowds and cameras and microphones, she has handled the questions of mobs of reporters. Now that she has seen her captor, she is not as cowed. "I want to phone my mother."

"No," the woman says, and that is that. The woman doesn't sound threatening or harsh, just final, and the child can tell there is no point in asking again.

The woman opens a large, leather-bound book and turns it so the child can see that it is filled with photographs. The child thinks of the albums of photos that her mother keeps, photos of the child posing, dancing, acting. Photos of the child starring in television commercials or wearing the costume jewelry crowns of beauty princesses. This photo album is filled with pictures of two women and a young boy, about her age. The woman holds the book so that the child can turn the pages and look at the pictures at her own pace.

The photos show scenes at a beach, at a picnic, at a birthday party. Sometimes the woman sitting in front of her is in the photo, sometimes it is another woman, younger, with short, curly, black hair and green eyes,

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always laughing. The boy is in almost every photo; he looks clever and happy, and the child thinks that he is someone she would like to meet. Sometimes both women are in the picture, and they are holding hands or hugging, or making funny faces at each other. The child pauses for a long time over a photo of the two women kissing one another.

I see that she is studying the photo that Dierdre took at Alice's birthday party, catching the two of us in mid-smooch. We are both wearing silly hats, but there is nothing silly about that kiss. At that moment I had wanted to convey to Alice everything that she meant to me, all my passion, all my joy, all my commitment. It is all there in the photo, and the child is right to linger over it. It is the heart of who Alice and I were to each other, and why the child is here.

She looks up at me with the question she doesn't know how to phrase. "You didn't know that two women could love each other like your mother and your father do, did you?" I ask. She shakes her head slowly, looking at that picture, at all the pictures, in a new light. "Well, we did. Her name is Alice, and the boy is Derek; he's seven. He's her son, but mine too, because I adopted him. Alice and I were together for five years before Derek was born, and then the three of us were a family, like you and your mother and your father. But Alice died, two months ago, of cancer. Has anyone close to you ever died?"

She shakes her head, and I wonder if I can make her understand. I close the album and set it aside. "It's like there's this hole in my life, in my heart — and in Derek's, too — that can never be filled. A pain that will never go away. We can never be happy again; we can't live without her. We need her back."

The child looks at me gravely. "I'm going to send you to find her," I say. "And you're going to bring her back to us."

The child considers the problem. She has not encountered death on a personal basis, and she is not sure how much she understands this adult mystery. The little that she thought she knew was that someone died, and you never saw them again. Some people talked as though the person who died went to a place, far away, a nicer place than here. It didn't explain why they could never come back.

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Maybe they could. This woman seemed to think so. Seemed to think that the child could somehow help her find and bring back this Alice she had loved and lost. Like a lost puppy. The child wonders how she would go about finding a lost adult, one who had gone far away. She frowns at the woman. "I don't know how."

Now comes the difficult part, the part I wish I didn't have to do. Everything up to this point has been nothing—the relentless research, the sleepless nights, the ruthless pursuit of forbidden knowledge, the preliminary spells and forging of the magical chain, even planning and executing the kidnapping. Nothing—compared to what I must do next. And nothing will come of this nothing, if I do not have the courage to act. If I let sentiment sway me. I finger what is in my pocket, and harden my heart.

I hold out the eight-by-ten portrait photo of Alice we had taken just two weeks before her doctor found the cancer. Still in the vibrant middle of her life, then, before the disease wasted her to nothing. "All you have to know is what she looks like. I'll take care of the rest. Look at her. Look at her face until you could find her in a crowd. Her name is Alice Wilton Stewart. She'll know her name, remember it."

The child studies the photo, whispers the name over to herself. "Once you've found her, the chain around your ankle is the way out. Follow it, and you'll both come home. Follow the chain, and whatever you do, don't either of you look back."

I move around behind her as she studies the photo. I slip the garrote from my pocket and flip it around her neck twice. It is just a simple length of cord, tied between the broken halves of an old paintbrush for leverage, but it serves. The child struggles for only a few moments, and I try not to hurt her more than necessary.

As she dies, I repeat over and over, "Find Alice and bring her back. Follow the chain home, and don't look behind you."

I lay the body out in a cross shape at the center of the spiral. I draw the red pentagrams on her palms. The body vanishes. I wait.

The child is standing in a dimly lit place, like a wood at twilight. The dirt under her bare feet is cold and damp; shadowy shapes like trees loom at the edges of her vision. But all she can focus on is a hole in the ground

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in front of her. It is a little bigger than her body, ragged edges snarled with tree roots, dark and scary. A faint voice that seems to come from all around her says, "You must climb down the hole." She doesn't want to, but the voice gives her no choice. She crouches and pushes past the roots; bits of dirt rain down the neck of her pajamas. The hole dives down at an angle, and she crawls in absolute darkness. She crawls and crawls and crawls....

The child finds herself sitting on a low hill in the midst of a vast gray plain. Figures mill about upon the plain, and the child sees that they are hundreds, thousands of people, more people than she has words for the counting. The plain stretches for as far as the child can see, and it is covered with people everywhere. They move about aimlessly, raising small clouds of gray dust. There are no trees, no grass, no animals: nothing but the gray, dusty plain, and the people. Even the air tastes of gray dust.

The child turns around, seeing that it is the same in every direction, and finds herself face-to-knee with an angel. She knows it is an angel because it is pure white, whiter than the milk her mother gives her to drink to make her bones and teeth strong; and because of the wings, which stretch out wide with soft, snowy feathers, and which move slightly, making a small, dusty breeze.

The angel looks exactly like the pictures of angels she has seen in books, except that it is naked, and it has both a penis and breasts. The angels in the books had flowing robes, so she never knew before that they had both breasts and penises. She examines the figure with great interest. It is the purest, smoothest white all over, like polished stone, even its fine cloud of white hair and its white, white eyes, which look back at her with equal interest. Pure white, everywhere, except for a single dark mole on its right cheek. When the angel sees the child staring at the mole, a muscle under its eye begins to twitch.

The angel speaks, and its voice is somehow also white and soft, like puffy clouds on a summer day, or deep drifts of fresh snow. "Welcome," the angel says, in that soft, white voice, and the child feels welcomed and safe.

"You have come on a long journey. You must be tired. Rest." The angel waves its hand, and a chair appears, just the right size for the child. "You must be hungry and thirsty. Eat. Drink." Another wave of the

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angel's hand, and a small table appears. It is covered with plates of fruit and cookies, and pitchers of water and milk. The angel pours milk into a glass and holds it out to her.

The child can smell apples, bananas, chocolate. She knows the milk will be ice-cold, just the way she likes it; she can even see the little beads of water sliding down the sides of the glass. She swallows hard, and realizes that her throat hurts terribly. When she puts her fingers to her neck, she finds a deep groove there. She remembers the basement, the woman, the cord around her throat and not being able to breathe. And she remembers what she is supposed to do.

"No, I don't think I should. But thank you all the same," she says to the angel.

It regards her for a moment, perhaps waiting to see if she will change her mind. Then it moves its hand just so: glass and milk disappear. The table, chair, food, and drink also disappear. "You are very wise for one so young," the angel says. "What do you seek here?"

The child wonders why the angel thinks she is wise. "There's someone I'm supposed to find, and take back with me."

"That is impossible," the angel says in its white, soft, calm voice. "It has been tried before. It has never succeeded."

The angel's voice is as soft and assured as ever, and the child is reminded of the woman in the basement, who said "No," and the child knew it was useless to argue. But as the child looks up at the angel, she sees that the muscle under its eye is twitching again, and she knows it is lying. She has never imagined that an angel could lie, but she knows this to be true now: This angel is lying.

"I have to do this. It's important. It's for a little boy; he needs his mother," the child says. She turns back to the plain and calls out over the dusty distance. "Alice! Alice Wilton Stewart! I'm looking for Alice Stewart!"

She calls in every direction. The angel watches patiently and does not try to interfere. The child is beginning to wonder if she must leave the tiny hill and search among the crowds of milling people, when a figure pushes through the mass and trudges up the hill toward her. "Alice?"

The picture the woman in the basement showed the child bears little resemblance to the figure who answers the child's summons. This woman

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is so thin, the child can see the sharp lines of her bones through gray, dusty flesh. Like the angel, she is naked; but unlike the angel, there are only scars where her breasts should be. Her head is bald, and covered with scars, too. Her eyes are no longer green but dusty gray, and sunk deep in a face that looks far older than the portrait. But it is the same woman, the child is sure, and the thin, naked woman confirms it. "I am Alice Stewart."

"I'm here to take you home. Back to Derek and...," the child realizes she doesn't know the name of the woman in the basement — "your friend," she finishes. The woman named Alice looks so blank that the child is afraid she has made a mistake after all.

Then the woman says, "Susan. I remember Susan." She starts to smile a little. "And Derek. My son." She begins to cry. "Please take me home." She kneels in front of the child and puts her head on the child's shoulder, crying. "*Please* take me home."

It is strange to feel like an adult, the child thinks, and to see an adult acting like a lost, little child. But this child has braved many things in her life. She lifts her chin and straightens her shoulders, just as she does before she goes on stage. She takes Alice's hand and tells her, "All we have to do is follow this chain around my ankle, see? We follow it, and it leads us home. But we must not look behind us. That's *very* important. Your friend said *don't look back.*"

Hand in hand, they start out across the plain, following the fine, golden chain, the only color in all the gray landscape. Behind them, the angel intones in its soft, white voice, "You will be back."

At last they come to the dark tunnel. Alice hesitates, but the child pushes her forward. "Go on, it's all right. See the chain? Just crawl. I'm right behind you."

It is a tight fit for Alice. She crawls upward with her elbows and knees. Behind her the child gives her feet a reassuring pat every so often, or murmurs an encouragement. The child feels confident now. She has done what she was sent to do. She has been strong and wise. She will be a hero, just as the woman promised.

Ahead of her she sees a lessening of the darkness as Alice reaches the mouth of the hole and pulls herself out. They are almost there....

And then Alice turns around and reaches a hand down the hole to help

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the child out. "*NO!*" she wails, but it is too late. Alice's face and hand get smaller as though they were receding from her, but in truth, she is receding from Alice. She is being sucked back down the tunnel. She grabs at clods of dirt, at roots, but she cannot stop her swift, fatal passage. Just before the tiny figure of Alice disappears from her view, she sees the woman grab the chain and give it hard yank.

The chain snaps with a sweet, melodic chime.

The boy Derek basks in the love of his two mothers, and grows into a happy and healthy teenager, then a strong and confident young man. He no longer remembers the time, long ago, when his birth mother contracted a terrible illness and almost died. Some part of him chooses not to see the faint dark shadow that lingers in her green eyes since that time. Likewise, he does not see the different darkness that shadows his other mother's brown eyes.

But every night when he sleeps, Derek dreams the same dream: A gray child, a girl — dust-crowned, anointed with misery and loss. Knees pulled up to her chest, naked and shivering, sitting in the middle of a vast plain of gray dust. A short length of golden chain circles her ankle and chimes with a sound like the sea. She looks directly at him with eyes that might once have been blue.

"Please help me," she whispers. "Don't leave me here. I want to go home. Please come for me — *please!*"

In the clear light of morning, he never remembers his dream.

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The past year saw a big scare from the "Y2K bug" and a big fracas surrounding the election, which made it easy to forget that the year 2000 was also a census-taking year. Mr. Cowdrey took note of this fact, and gifted us with a clever look at the event.

Nature 2000

By Albert E. Cowdrey

THE FIRST BEES WERE SEEKING out the first flowers when Mr. DiTaranto, comfortable in pajamas and sleek robe, leaned across the table where he had breakfasted and parted the silken curtains of his bedroom window.

In the distance he could see the sterile towers of the financial district, but in this narrow street the slender elms were leafing out as the weather warmed. Green feathered the tangle of branches; down below, robins bounced on reviving lawns.

"Ah," he whispered. "Even though people drive nature out of the city, it keeps coming back, doesn't it?"

Although Mr. DiTaranto was an indoor type, seldom leaving his house, he thought of himself as someone perfectly attuned to nature. And to art as well. Releasing the curtain, he patted his mouth with a white silk napkin and reached for a plastic-wrapped package. A shipment of classic VCR tapes had arrived that morning by mail, addressed to the house next door; Mr. DiTaranto had invited the mailperson in for a cup of instant coffee, and had ended up with both her and the tapes.

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A great fan of the cinema during his relaxed, digestive phases, he began unwrapping with anticipatory pleasure. Oh my, he thought, a veritable feast. Gable's Back and Garson's Got Him. *Them.* The Bates Motel crew. And —

A bell chimed. Surprised, he parted the curtains again and spied a young woman standing at his door. Lacking any visible neck, he had trouble craning. He had to lean his whole unwieldy body to one side so that his small head, mounted on his bulk like a turret, could eye the visitor properly.

One of those thin, intense types, he thought. Nervous, dark-complexioned and looking even darker because she wore a navy-blue suit tightly belted at the waist. With one hand she carried a tote bag marked with the Sierra Club logo; with the other, a blue plastic folder. While he watched, she juggled her burdens and touched the bell again.

Though somewhat torpid after his meal, Mr. DiTaranto was unwilling to let the visitor wander off. He hardly seemed athletic, with his heavy body and his thin arms and legs, yet once he had made up his mind to answer the door he rose and pattered down the long flight of stairs with surprising speed. In the front hall he brushed aside still more silk hangings and threw the door open wide.

"Yes?"

"Census Bureau," said the dark young woman in an unpleasantly nasal voice. "Sir, your house has been selected for a, hm, hm, in-depth interview. If you agree to participate, you'll help your government prepare a valuable cross-sectional image of America as the new millennium begins."

"Always glad to cooperate," he murmured. He was not much attracted by her — too skinny, he thought. Then he remembered a line from an old movie: Spencer Tracy saying about Katherine Hepburn, in a Brooklyn accent, "There ain't much meat on her, but what there is, is cherce."

Bulkily he stood aside and smiled her in, then quietly turned a large key in the deadlock and slipped the key into his pocket. Meanwhile she was moving with brisk, nervous quickness through the portières into his cushioned living room. Her nasal voice never ceased, and the sound was made worse somehow by her habit of inserting "hms" every few sentences.

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"Hm, hm, hm. What unusual decor," she gossiped. "I see you live *à la Turque.* Such interesting wall hangings you have. Is this carpet real silk?"

Although annoyed by her voice and her nosiness, Mr. DiTaranto was nothing if not hospitable.

"Pull up a cushion, dear lady," he said, "and sit down. Would you like a nice cup of instant coffee?"

"How kind of you! Actually, I've had breakfast...but even so.... While I'm waiting, I'll just get my forms out, if you don't mind. Hm, hm, hm. This is my first time as a census volunteer. Normally I sell Adorée cosmetics and Macron appliances. Anything, you know, that takes me into people's homes. I do so enjoy seeing how different folks live...."

Her voice followed him into the kitchen at the rear of the house. The room was ample, for Mr. DiTaranto was a bit of a gourmet in his own way. Two large blenders reflected his preference for drinking his food. He had no refrigerator, but the ceiling held a row of steel hooks from which hung a number of well-wrapped bundles, including the mailperson, who was still twitching.

He put the kettle on the stove. While it heated, he laid out on his butcher-block table a set of knives, a suction apparatus, and a pair of heavy, old-fashioned ice tongs that he had found useful in the past for moving guests and other weighty objects around.

When the kettle whistled at him, he poured the census taker a cup of instant and added a few knockout drops from a small bottle that stood on his spice rack.

He returned smiling to the living room, set the cup down on a small inlaid table, and seated himself opposite her. Her voice droned on.

"Now let me see, your name is, hm, hm, Ara DiTaranto. What a musical name. I could just see you as an opera singer. Physically, too — like Pavarotti. Are you Italian?"

"Only by descent, my dear," he murmured, wishing she would drink her coffee and turn off that harsh voice for good. He could not see *her* as an opera singer.

"My name is Vesper Simpson, by the way," she informed him, rummaging in her tote bag, perhaps for a pen. "Of course, I'm a Wasp."

"White Anglo-Saxon Protestant?" he smiled.

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"No," she said, "the other kind."

Drawing out a hypodermic needle, she leaned forward and plunged it into his solar plexus, just above his broad belly.

For a moment all his arms and legs waved wildly, then became absolutely still. He toppled slowly and lay quiet among the silk cushions, a cushion himself in all but the thin limbs that gradually contracted over his belly in an attitude almost of prayer. His eyes remained alive, staring wildly, but the only movement in his large body was the beating of his heart.

His visitor, humming to herself, left him like that while she explored the house, downstairs, upstairs, all around. She continued to talk to her victim, raising her penetrating voice to make sure that he heard her.

"I saw the silk curtains in your windows, and I found myself wondering, now who lives there? Hm, hm. Oh goodness," she cried, "*what* a big kitchen! Oh, how convenient for you. Macron appliances, too. But for my purposes...something a little cozier, I think? Hm, hm, hm."

She reappeared carrying the ice tongs and clamped them on one of Mr. DiTaranto's feet. Without apparent effort she dragged him, bumping softly, up the long flight of stairs into his bedroom. She pulled him up on the bed, straightened him out and vanished again, reappearing after a moment with her tote bag in hand.

She drew out a single shining egg, licked it, slipped her hand inside his pajama jacket, and glued it firmly to the middle of Mr. DiTaranto's chest. The egg's outer covering felt like smooth, flexible plastic. Something was already stirring inside it.

She adjusted Mr. DiTaranto so that he could see the VCR and put on a classic tape *(The Incredible Shrinking Man)*. Then she leaned close to his immobile face.

"I'd like you to be comfortable while you wait," she explained. "I'm afraid you'll be quite uncomfortable later on. Some people, I'm sure, resent all this, but I know I can count on understanding from someone like *you*. After all, it's only nature."

Her voice was like a small, whirring bandsaw. How could he have failed to know what she was from the beginning?

She drew the key from his pocket and hastened back downstairs. In the living room she smiled at the cup of instant and with a quick, nervous

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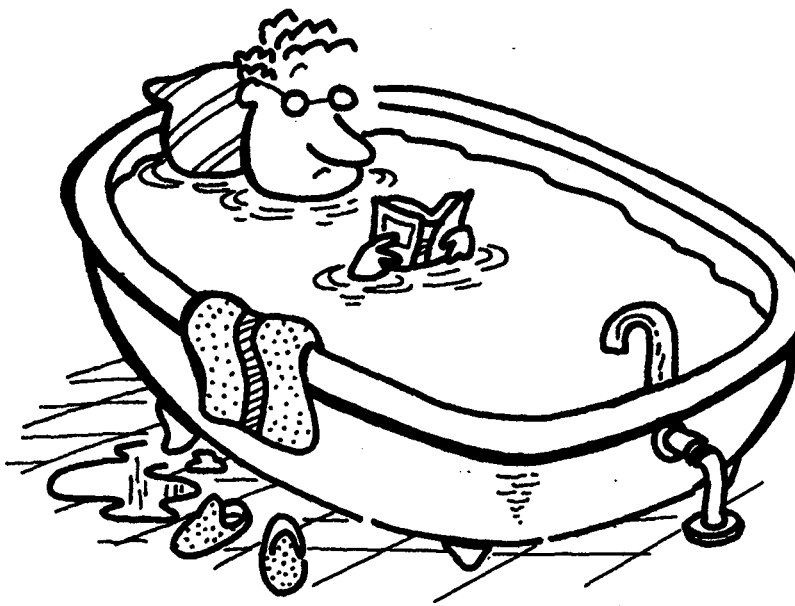
gesture knocked it over, staining one of the deep silk cushions that littered the floor.

Then she sat down and took out the form with Mr. DiTaranto's address neatly lettered across the top. Under "Size of Household," she wrote, "One." Then she scratched that out and wrote in, "Two."

"Hm, hm. For a while, anyway," she said, rising. She pushed her way impatiently through skeins and sheets of dusty hanging silk, unlocked the front door and let herself out.

"Spring!" she cried, viewing the robins, the bees, the flowers, the fresh green leaves of the elms. "I love it!"

She set off down the street, humming to herself — a taut, thin person, narrow at the waist, still full of nervous energy. She needed to be quick. She had three hundred more eggs to deliver.



"Wait a minute," Bob thought. "This isn't my book. And those aren't my hands!"

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A native of New Jersey, July Lewis has been living in San Francisco for the past few years but plans to leave soon for Massachusetts. Her first story for us (indeed, her first published work) turns on its head one of the fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm, "The Griffin." The results are quite simply charming.

Rude Kate

By July Lewis

ONCE UPON A TIME IN A faraway land, there lived a young peasant lass named Kate. She caused her parents no end of grief and worry, for since the day she was born, she absolutely refused to behave as a proper girl. She wouldn't wear dresses, she ran and played with the boys, and even got into fights — which she usually won. She could barely cook, was hopeless at housework, and had no patience at all for sewing. Worst of all were her manners. She was bold and blunt, and she told jokes using language that women were not supposed to know, let alone repeat.

But although she was terrible at womanly pursuits, she excelled at everything her brothers were supposed to do. She worked well in the fields and with the animals; she could wield a hammer, and had a knack for fixing things. She was tall, strong, and brave, and if ever anyone told her she should be otherwise, she simply laughed. People tolerated her strange ways, for she was cheerful and easygoing, always willing to lend a hand, and no one could deny that she told those awful jokes really well.

One day, a crier came to the village and announced that the King was

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searching the land for someone who could cure his son, Prince Aiden. The young man had been ill for a year and no doctor had been able to help him, or even determine what ailed him. Anyone who could restore the Prince to health would be rewarded handsomely.

Kate was distressed to hear the news.

"Ill for a whole year? That's terrible! The poor lad. Well, it may be that I can do something for him."

"You?" scoffed her mother. "What are you going to do for the prince? You've never healed anyone."

"Well, I've never tried, have I? And the only way to find out if you can do something is to attempt it. At worst it won't help. At best, he'll be cured and I'll be rewarded. Besides, it's about time I got out to see the world." Her family knew it was no use arguing with her, and it would be a relief to be rid of such a troublesome daughter. So the next day she packed some food and clothing, kissed her family good-bye, and set out on her journey.

After a few days of walking, she came to a dark forest. The local townspeople said that it was haunted, but Kate was not afraid. She hadn't been in it for long before she came to a clearing with a beautiful apple tree in the middle. The apples were the prettiest she had ever seen. They were golden yellow with blushing red cheeks, and not a blemish on any of them.

"I think those apples will do the prince some good," said Kate. "He's probably constipated; these nobles always are. I'm sure they'll help." So she began picking them.

Suddenly a fat, hideous, terrifying old woman appeared out of nowhere and shouted, "What are you doing, stealing my apples?"

If Kate was startled, she didn't show it. She replied evenly, "My apologies, grandmother, I didn't know they were yours."

"Didn't know? Didn't ask! I know your kind, thinking the whole world is yours for the picking!"

"Ma'am, I certainly didn't mean to — "

"Tramping through an old woman's garden! Taking what little she has!"

Kate was getting annoyed, but tried to keep her temper. "Look. We're in the middle of the woods. I thought — "

"You thought the old woman was defenseless and you could do as you pleased, didn't you? Ah, but what if she isn't defenseless? What if she

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has...*powers?*" the crone intoned theatrically. "Powers beyond your ken?"

"Listen, keep the damned apples!"

"Oh, no, you've taken them — and now you'll pay the price!" She chortled evilly. "What do you think of spending the rest of your years as a dog chained up in my kitchen?"

"What do I think?" Kate retorted, finally losing her temper. "I think you're talking out of your arse, you crazy old hag — which would explain your breath. But if you really have the power to turn me into a dog, why don't you use it to get yourself bedded by some nice young man? That would be more of a challenge, by the look of you, and if it worked, maybe you wouldn't be such a bitch anymore!"

The woman looked shocked for a moment. Then she began to wheeze and shake. Kate thought she might be having some sort of fit, but after a minute, she realized that the old woman was actually laughing. She laughed so hard and long that tears came to her eyes.

"By all that's unholy!" she gasped. "No one — in five hundred years — no one has ever said such a thing to me! 'That explains your breath!'" she repeated, and started laughing again. Eventually she sighed and wiped her eyes. "Where did you get your nerve, dearie? Oh, take the apples, it's worth it! Eat as many as you like!"

"Um, thank you," Kate said cautiously, convinced that the woman was out of her mind. "But they're not for me. I thought — well, the prince is ill, and I thought these might help him get well."

"Did you?" asked the woman with a keen eye. "Then, so they shall. Now run along, before I have second thoughts about getting myself a new pet!" Kate left the woman gladly, shaking her head and carrying the apples with her.

In time, Kate arrived at the palace gates. When the guards asked her business, she told them she had brought a cure for the prince. The guardsmen laughed hugely.

"And what are you going to do with the reward?" one of them asked.

"Why, spend it of course, like anyone else," she replied.

"But don't you know? The king has just promised his daughter's hand in marriage to whoever can cure his son!"

Kate laughed. "No, I hadn't heard. That does complicate things a bit.

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I'm not sure I'm ready for marriage, but I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. The prince's health comes first." The guardsmen wished her luck and showed her through. Soon she was brought to see the prince's physicians. When they saw the strange young woman in men's clothing who had naught to offer the prince but apples, they nearly turned her away. But she spoke so confidently, and the apples were so strangely beautiful, that they agreed to let her in to see him.

Prince Aiden lay in the middle of a large, ornate bed, propped up by pillows. He was pale and thin, with deep shadows under his eyes. He looked truly sick, and yet was still, Kate noted, rather attractive. She bowed handsomely before him.

"Rise," he said, tiredly. "I suppose you've brought me some exotic cure?"

"No, your Highness," she said. "I've brought you apples."

"Apples?" he repeated, lifting an eyebrow.

"An apple a day keeps the doctor away, that's what my grandma always said."

"That's ridiculous!" said the prince, annoyed. "I hardly think an illness that has defeated the best doctors in the whole country is going to succumb to a few apples!"

"Irritable, aren't we?" Kate observed cheerfully.

"Yes, I'm irritable! You would be too if you'd had a headache, a stomachache, fever and chills and were too weak to get out of bed every day for an entire year! *Over* a year." He sank back into the pillows, looking miserable. "I'm sorry. I know I'm being awful," he said unhappily.

"Not at all, your Highness," Kate said, truly sorry for him. "I understand. But here, try one of the apples. I really think it will make you feel better." The prince looked at the beautiful apple she handed him.

"I suppose it can't hurt." He shrugged and accepted it. He bit into the fruit.

"Mmm...that's good. That's really good." He took another bite and swallowed. "Well, whether it's effective or not, it's certainly more pleasant than the other cures they've brought me."

"Really?" asked Kate.

"Oh God, yes. Leeching, cupping, purging, the fresh air cure — in February! And the countless horrifying concoctions they've made me

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take. The last one was supposedly bought at the Goblin Bazaar and I have never tasted anything more disgusting."

"You're lucky it only tasted bad," assured Kate. "You have to watch out for that goblin magick. I heard of a man who went to the Goblin Bazaar because his wife wouldn't make love to him anymore. So he tells his problem to one of the dealers there, and the goblin winks and says, 'I have just the thing for you, sir! These slippers will do the trick!' And as he turns to answer another customer, the man tries the slippers on. And immediately he drops his trousers, grabs the goblin from behind and starts buggering away! And the goblin screams, 'No, no, you've got them on the wrong feet!'"

The prince burst out laughing, almost choking on apple in the process. "That's terrible!" he cried, still laughing. "No one ever tells me jokes like that."

"Don't they? That's a shame." The prince set down his apple core and she tossed him another which, to his surprise, he caught. "While you eat that, I'll tell you another." And she told him about the wandering peddler and the sheep. And then the pig with the wooden leg. Handing him another apple, she sang a song about a lusty blacksmith. On it went, with Kate enjoying her appreciative audience, and with the prince laughing more than he had since he'd been ill. And in time, he finished all the apples.

"Those were wonderful," he said, as he put the last core in the basket. He yawned sleepily. "I don't know what made me eat so many. I suppose I'll be sorry in the morning, but...."

"No you won't," said Kate. "You'll be well."

"I wish I could believe you," he said, wistfully. "But you have cheered me up, Kate, for which I am grateful."

"It was my pleasure, your Highness. But you're tired now. You should be getting to sleep."

"You're right," he admitted. She rose to leave.

"Good night then, your Highness. Hopefully I'll see you in better health tomorrow."

"Good night, Kate...," he said, drifting off to sleep as she closed the door.

* * *

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That night Kate slept long and well in a small servant's chamber, and in the morning she was directed to the servant's dining hall for breakfast. It was a calm, pleasant atmosphere as the laborers began their daily routines. But as Kate sat down with her second plate (she had worked up quite an appetite on her journey), there seemed to be something of a stir outside. A maid ran in, whispered with a well-dressed older housekeeper, and they hurried out together. Kate paid little attention and focused on her eggs, but around her the commotion grew, as people milled about, talked in excited voices and stole glances at Kate. Finally the old housekeeper came back in and cried, "It's true! I've just seen him myself! Prince Aiden is well again, he's cured!" The servants shouted for joy, and Kate smiled broadly, as pleased as could be.

"I thought I might be able to do something for him," was all she said, and she went back to her breakfast.

It wasn't long until she was summoned before the court. They led her into the grand throne room, filled with nobles and courtiers and abuzz with excitement. At the head of it the royal family was seated. The King and Queen glowed with happiness and relief at the resolution of their son's long illness. The Princess, seated next to her parents, was doubly relieved. Because her brother's savior had turned out to be a woman, she would not be forced to marry a stranger. Happiest of them all, of course, was Prince Aiden. He stood resplendent in his royal clothes, strong and healthy once more. His joyful smile beamed all the brighter when he caught sight of Kate; and if he was rather attractive when he was ill, he was devastatingly so now. She smiled back at him and bowed gracefully. The King spoke.

"We are overjoyed this day to find that our son has been restored to health by our loyal subject, Kate. Words cannot express the gratitude we feel, but we offer to her our most royal, and humble, thanks." There were cheers and applause from those gathered. The Prince was unable to contain his happiness. He rose and stepped forward, taking Kate's hands in his.

"I cannot thank you enough," he said, emotion overwhelming propriety. "I thought I would never be well again, and you have cured me. You've given me back my life. I — I will be forever in your debt."

The King looked slightly embarrassed by his son's emotional speech, and also by the fact that Aiden was actually touching the strange peasant

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woman. Which was not, he thought, strictly necessary. But gamely, he continued on.

"For this inestimable service you have rendered us, we offer you the reward of one thousand pieces of gold — and our eternal gratitude." There was more applause, and the King gestured to a page who came forward with a chest filled with gold. Kate glanced at it but did not take it. She looked back at the king.

"Your Majesty," she said, "It was my pleasure to help him, and I don't want to seem ungrateful, but you did promise the hand of your daughter in marriage to whoever could cure your son,"

"Well, yes; but you can't want to marry the Princess...," replied the King with a puzzled laugh.

"I don't see why not," objected Kate. "I think she's very attractive." She winked at the princess, who blushed, confused.

"But you're a woman! Ah — er — aren't you?" The King paled, fearing he'd made a terrible faux pas.

"There's only one way to tell for sure," Kate said, laughing. "But never mind, never mind. I'm not one to cause trouble. If you say I can't marry your daughter, that's all right. I will happily settle for your son instead." And she smiled slowly at the handsome Prince, making it clear that was what she'd wanted all along.

"You can't marry my son!" thundered the King, indignant.

"I can't marry your daughter, I can't marry your son...your word isn't precisely your bond, is it, King?" Everyone gasped at her temerity. The Queen looked as if she would faint. The Princess was taken aback as well, but she couldn't help being secretly delighted at this turn of events. The Prince himself was shocked and bewildered, both by the fact that Kate was demanding his hand in marriage, as if he were a woman; and by the unexpected thrill it gave him to be treated this way.

As for the King, he didn't know what to do. He prided himself on being a man of his word, but to marry Kate to his daughter was impossible, and to his son, unthinkable! Luckily one of his counselors came to his rescue, whispering in his ear.

"What? Oh — ah, yes! Yes, of course, what you say is reasonable," said the King, recovering his composure. "And yet my daughter is not the heir to the throne. My son is, and to win him you must prove yourself even

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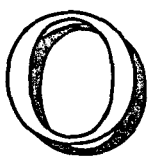
more worthy." The counselor whispered in his ear again. "To that end, you must build a boat which goes faster on land than it does on water!" The royal smile was smug, but Kate didn't bat an eyelash.

"Very well, King," she said. "If that's all you want, I'm happy to oblige." Her eyes met prince Aiden's, and to his confusion, his heart suddenly skipped a beat. Butterflies fluttered in his stomach. His breath came quick as she drew near and took his hand in hers. He knew he should pull it away indignantly, but it was the last thing he wanted to do. When she raised his hand to her lips and kissed it, he felt a strange, golden joy pierce him through and through.

"I'll return soon, my Prince," she said, and with a brief bow to the King, she left. As controversy erupted, Aiden put a hand to his heart and wondered what on earth had just happened to him.



VER THE NEXT two weeks Kate worked on the King's task. First she consulted with ship builders and carpenters at length. Then she drew up her plans, measuring and adjusting until they were just right. Finally she was ready to build, and she worked, hammering and sawing from dawn till dusk every day.

Meanwhile the Prince, although recovered from his previous ailment, had fallen victim to quite another. He sighed all day long. He stared dreamily into space when other people were talking to him. He even, God help him, began to write poetry. In short, the prince was in love. He tried to fight it at first. How could he be in love with such an outrageous woman, even one who had helped him as she had? And yet when he reminded himself of all the scandalous things she had said and done, it only made him sigh more deeply over her.

His parents noticed his odd behavior, and finally his father demanded an explanation. Blushing, the Prince confessed that he was head over heels in love with Kate and wanted nothing more than to marry her! The King was furious at first, but calmed down by reminding himself that Kate could never complete the impossible task he had given her, and that in time Aiden would get over his ridiculous infatuation. But that very day, a messenger arrived saying that Kate had indeed finished her task, and requested his Majesty's presence. His mood going from bad to worse, he

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assembled an entourage of nobles — including his lovesick son, who would not be dissuaded — and left for the docks to see the miraculous boat.

"Hello, your Majesty!" she called as he approached. "Hello, your Highness," she said affectionately to Aiden. "You look more handsome every time I see you." He blushed — he'd been doing an awful lot of that lately — and his heart went pitter-pat. He opened his mouth to reply but the King cut him off.

"Where is the boat?" he asked, shortly.

"Right here, your Majesty. I'll show you how it works." And she began to demonstrate the craft, which was not, after all, a miracle, but merely cleverly designed. It had a double hull; the inner one wassound, so it floated, but the large outer hull had holes cut so that it was completely filled with water. This made the boat so heavy it could barely move. To slow it down further, Kate had built it so that its three rudders worked at cross-purposes to each other, and the whole thing was as bulky and unwieldy as human hands could make it. That much being shown, it was hauled out of the water and onto land, where it was revealed that there were wheels on the bottom. There was a slope to the road, and with a bit of a push, the boat was speeding along on land, faster than it ever could on water.

The King was not pleased.

"This isn't exactly what I meant!" he fumed.

"But sire," Kate said, with a twinkle in her eye, "it is exactly what you said."

The King ground his teeth. "Yes. I suppose it is. You have done well. But to marry my son you must prove yourself worthier still!"

"But Father, I — " Aiden began.

"Silence! You must — " He paused as he tried to think of something. "Ah! You must come to the rabbit hutch at dawn. The keeper will release the rabbits into the meadow. You must watch over them and herd them back at dusk — alive and unharmed — without losing any!"

Kate paused thoughtfully before she replied. "All right, King," she said, a smile spreading slowly across her face. "If that's all you want, I will certainly oblige you." She turned to Prince Aiden, who was obviously upset at his father's new command. "Don't worry, your Highness," she

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said. "You'll be mine soon enough." And she took him by the hand as she had before, only this time she pulled him to her and kissed him gently on the lips. His heart leapt and his manhood rose at the touch. He held her hand close to his heart.

"I will wait for you, Kate. Good luck." And with that the King, who had had enough, led his son and the royal entourage back to the palace.

As soon as they left, Kate headed straight for the apothecary. After a brief discussion with her, and a consultation with a neighbor who kept rabbits, Kate made a small purchase and then left for the greengrocer's. There she bought a large quantity of carrots. Back at the castle, where she was staying, she borrowed a pot of water from the kitchen. Into it she put the carrots and the contents of the package from the apothecary. Satisfied, she left for the tavern to play dice.

The next morning she arrived at the rabbit hutch well before dawn. There were a hundred rabbits, and she fed a bit of the carrots she had prepared to each one. When she was done she sat down, and soon the keeper arrived to release the rabbits. When the cage doors were lifted, off they bounded in every direction! But Kate was not worried. And indeed, the rabbits didn't get very far. They began to seem disoriented and lethargic, and soon were tripping over themselves and lolling on the ground as if they were drunk. Kate strolled out and picked up the little animals one by one, arranging them around a rock. There she sat and watched over them as they hopped listlessly about, occasionally picking one up and bringing it back to the fold if it got too far. If any of them looked too perky she fed it another bit of carrot. So the day passed, and by dusk she had herded the pliant bunnies back to their hutch. She was putting them back in their cages when the King and his nobles appeared. His initial surprise at seeing she had not lost them all was quickly replaced by alarm and suspicion at their behavior.

"What's wrong with them?" he demanded. "Are they sick?"

"No," Kate replied. "They're drugged."

"What?!"

"They're drugged. I drugged them. How else could I keep track of a hundred rabbits?"

The King was not satisfied. "I said they were to be returned unharmed!"

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"They're not harmed, your Majesty. They're just a little sleepy, and they'll be fine in the morning."

"Hmmph! Well, we'll see about that tomorrow!" he said.

But the next day the rabbit keeper informed the King that his charges were quite recovered, and Kate came to court to claim her prize.

"Your Majesty," she said, bowing before him. "I have cured Prince Aiden of an incurable illness. I have built you a boat that goes faster on land than it does on water. And I have herded one hundred rabbits to open pasture and back without losing or harming even one. And now, if you please, I would like to marry your son."

"Not so fast!" said the King, and this time there was a deadly seriousness to his anger. "You have proved yourself clever, and certainly *lucky*, and more bold than you have any right to be — but that is not enough. You must now perform this task: bring me three tail feathers that you, yourself, have plucked from the monster known as the Griffin. You may pluck them from him alive or dead, but if dead, you must have slain him by your own hand!"

"No, Father!" cried Prince Aiden, horrified. "She'll be killed!"

"Then let her die!" bellowed the King. He turned back to Kate. "If you would come in here dressed like a man, acting like a man, and demanding my son's hand in marriage like a man, then you can risk your life like a man! Or," he said, calming down a note, "you can accept what I first offered you: one thousand pieces of gold."

The prince, along with everyone else, looked to Kate to see how she would reply. Her arms were crossed, her gaze was baleful, and she had the look of a woman whose patience was being sorely tested. Finally she gave an exasperated sigh.

"Very well, King. If that's what you want, I suppose I can get it for you. But when I finish this third — and *final* challenge," she said, with a warning in her voice, "I *will* marry your son." She turned to Prince Aiden, whose eyes were filled with love and anguish. "Until then, my sweet Prince," she said in a softer tone, and she took him into her arms and kissed him. It started sweet and tender, and it escalated into a scandalous, passionate embrace, with her tongue in his mouth and her hands where they had no business being.

"That's enough!" roared the King, beet red. Smiling, Kate released the

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Prince, panting, lovestruck, and almost painfully amorous. Which, given men's fashions in those days, was obvious to everyone. And with a final nod to the King, she left. Aiden burst into tears and ran from the room.

But jaunty and confident as Kate seemed, she was not, in fact, very happy. The Griffin was a fierce and terrible monster who lived in the northern mountains. He had the head and wings of an eagle, and the body of a lion. He was said to be all knowing; but no one could avail themselves of his wisdom, for he devoured every human that crossed his path. Now, Kate had certainly been in a few fights, but she had never faced anything like that. But, she reminded herself, she'd never kept rabbits, built a boat or healed the sick before this, and it didn't seem to hinder her. So she pondered how she would deal with the Griffin while she finished her preparations.

Just as she was about to leave, there was a knock at the door. When she opened it she found a nervous-looking messenger, who kept glancing about him as if he expected trouble. He handed her a large bundle.

"This is from the Prince," he said in a low voice, and scurried away the moment it was in Kate's hands. Curious, she unwrapped it and found the Prince's own sword and scabbard inside. She smiled broadly.

"Well, this is just the thing! I'm sure this will come in handy." And she strapped it on. It fit her stride perfectly. Her mood was once again buoyant as she headed out on her quest.

The road to the northern mountains was long. She had to sleep where she could along the way, with only thoughts of her beautiful prince to keep her company. One night she arrived at a castle and asked for lodging. When she told them where she was going, the lord of that castle replied, "The Griffin! I've heard that he knows everything. Some months ago, I lost the key to a chest of jewels. Perhaps you could ask him where it is?" And Kate replied that if she had a chance, she certainly would. Later on in her journey she came to another castle. Although they were generous and offered her hospitality, everyone seemed very sad. When Kate asked why, she was told that the lord's daughter was terribly ill, and no one could help her. Kate shook her head in dismay.

"These nobles are a sickly lot!" she proclaimed. "Comes of eating rich food and living in damp castles — not to mention inbreeding. Well, I'm fresh out of apples, but if I can, I'll ask the Griffin how to cure her." Soon

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after her stay there, the road started up into the mountains and the land grew more and more deserted. At one point the road leveled out and seemed to end at the edge of a beautiful alpine lake. A very tall, very glum man sat upon the shore. He sighed morosely when he caught sight of Kate.

"I suppose you'll be wanting to go across," he said.

"Yes, that's where I'm going. Are you the ferryman?"

"No," he replied in dismal tones. "I carry people across. On my shoulders. Here, get on," he said, kneeling before her. So she climbed on, and he waded into the lake. He shivered pathetically as the water crept up his body and soaked his clothes.

"Chilly?" Kate inquired.

"Freezing," he lamented. "It takes me hours to warm up afterwards. I'm always catching cold. Ow."

"What?"

"Nothing. Just my neck. I get these sharp pains sometimes. It's all the extra weight."

"You don't seem to like your job very much."

"I hate it."

"Then why do you do it?"

"Because they ask me to," he said, as if that explained everything.

"You could say no," she pointed out, patiently.

This stopped him in his tracks. He seemed to squirm at the thought. "I couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because — well — I just couldn't."

Kate rolled her eyes and let it drop. Once on the other side, he asked her where she was going, and she told him.

"The Griffin!" he said, brightening just a tad. "Maybe you can ask him how I can fix it so they won't make me do this anymore!"

"Sure," replied Kate, although she thought saying "no" was really the best solution. She bade him farewell and continued on.

It wasn't long after that that she finally reached the Griffin's lair. A massive oak and iron door was set into the side of the mountain, and the entryway was strewn with bones. She gripped her sword; during her journey she had enlisted instruction from any swordsman she met, and through practice, was now fairly competent in its use. But still in all, she

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was a pleasant, friendly sort of person, and it wasn't like her to just charge in, sword flashing. No, when you want something, she reasoned, it's better simply to ask first. So she walked right up to that door and knocked.

The door creaked open and there stood the Griffin, eight feet tall and every bit as terrible as he was rumored to be. His claws gleamed, gripping the door, and his cruel beak curved to a sharp, deadly point. His eyes seemed to gleam at the sight of her.

"Yes?" he asked pleasantly. "May I help you?"

"Ah...I hope you can," replied Kate, encouraged by his friendly manner. "My name's Kate and I need to ask a favor of you. But it's kind of a long story."

"Well, I'd be delighted to hear it, my dear! It isn't often that I get company. Why don't you come inside and tell me all about it."

Kate gladly accepted.

Inside, the Griffin's home was cozy and quaint, with soft cushioned chairs, a merrily crackling fire, and a brass teakettle whistling.

"Have a seat, my dear. I was just making myself a cup of tea." The Griffin bustled about in the kitchen for a few minutes and then came to the table with hot tea and biscuits.

"There you are. Would you like some marmalade?"

"No, thank you." She shook her head in puzzlement. "I have to admit that I'm surprised. You're not what I expected. I heard that you devour everyone you see." The Griffin laughed pleasantly.

"Oh no, my dear. No, I devour every *man* that I see."

Kate stopped with the cup halfway to her lips. "You do?"

"I'm afraid so. One of those Griffin peculiarities. Can't seem to help myself." He took a sip of tea. "But women don't affect me that way at all. Not a bit. I can see how the confusion came about; men are the only ones who ever come up here! So do tell me your story, Kate. I'm ever so curious." And so Kate told him all about Prince Aiden, and the King, and all the tests he had given her, ending with the Griffin's tail feathers.

"Well!" exclaimed the Griffin. "What a marvelous tale! It's the most romantic thing I've ever heard! Of course I'll help you," he said, getting up and presenting his backside to her. "Take three nice ones. Go on, I've plenty to spare." Kate plucked three beautiful golden feathers, placed them in her vest, and thanked him.

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"Not at all," he replied. "Glad to be of service. Have some more tea."

"Thanks. You know, I'm just remembering, on the way here I stayed at a castle whose lord had lost the key to a treasure chest. He wondered if you knew where it is. It's said that you know everything."

"That's quite an exaggeration," said the Griffin, chuckling. "But yes, I can tell him where the key is. It's under the third step in the woodshed."

"Really! Well, he'll be glad to know that. And I also stayed at a castle where the lord's daughter was sick — "

"Ah yes. A toad has made a nest of her hair in the root cellar, and if she got it back, she would recover."

"A toad's nest?"

"Yes. It's a magic toad."

"Oh. Well, I'll tell them what you said. And there's just one more thing — I met a very tall man on the road here who carries people across the lake on his shoulders, and he wants to know what he can do so they won't ask him to do it anymore."

"All he has to do is set one person down in the middle of the lake and let them drown. Then they would never ask him to do it again."

Kate started to laugh but then saw that he was serious. "But he'd be a murderer. And they'd hang him."

"Yes," he replied, still smiling. Kate felt an ominous chill. She set down her cup.

"Well, you've been very helpful, and I really can't thank you enough. But I mustn't take up any more of your time — what's that sound?" she asked. There was a noise like roaring in the distance, and it seemed to be getting closer.

"Oh dear, that's my wife. She's come home early."

"She doesn't sound very happy," she said, alarmed, as she got to her feet and put a hand on her sword.

"No, she isn't. She can smell you, and she devours every *woman* she sees. Griffin peculiarity," he shrugged. His bland, pleasant smile suddenly seemed horribly sinister.

"Can't you stop her?" she asked, raising her voice above the roaring.

"Oh no, not when she's like this. I really didn't think she'd be home this soon, but these things happen. It's too bad you won't make it back to your prince, but it was nice meeting you." Kate swore and drew her sword.

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The sound was approaching so fast she knew it would be pointless to run, so she faced the door, sword in hand, and stood her ground. In a moment it burst open and there was the Griffin's wife, bigger and more terrible than her husband, coming straight for her. Unflinching, Kate raised her sword, lunged between flashing claws and ran the creature through.

The monster screamed horribly and fell back, gouts of black blood spurting from her chest.

"Dear me!" exclaimed the Griffin, sounding indignant. "Is that any way to repay hospitality? Well? Hmmph! I really think you ought to leave!"

Kate, gasping and covered with blood, was only too happy to oblige. Checking once to make sure she still had the Griffin's feathers, she ran out of there as fast as she could. The Griffin's wife was still screaming and thrashing in pain, and as she ran, Kate heard her husband comforting her.

"There, there, dear, you can always grow a new heart...."

THE JOURNEY BACK, once she had gotten a safe distance from the Griffin's lair, was happy and largely uneventful. The tall man at the lake, when she met him again, was eager to hear what the Griffin had said. But Kate would only tell him once she was on the other side. Then she gave him the Griffin's advice, including the fact that they would hang him if he followed it. The man was very disappointed.

"But that doesn't help me at all!" he wailed. "I don't want to die!"

"Then you'll just have to tell them no, won't you?" said Kate.

He looked utterly despairing at the prospect.

Kate sighed. "Well if you can't do that, maybe you could build a raft and ferry people across. That would be an improvement."

He looked slightly hopeful at the suggestion.

"A raft? Well...of course, it isn't what they asked me to do...but maybe...."

"Think about it," she advised, and she continued on her way.

When she got to the castle with the sick daughter she told them immediately what the Griffin had said. Strange though it was, they followed his advice. A nest of her hair was just where he said it would be, and once it was in her hands her health was immediately restored! The

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whole castle rejoiced, and this time Kate was quite content with gold as a reward.

Onward she continued. She knew she was close to her destination when she reached the castle where the lord had lost the key to his treasure chest. Again she conveyed the Griffin's answer and again he was correct. The lord was ecstatic, and gave Kate handfuls of jewels from the chest in gratitude.

But it was another reward that filled her thoughts and quickened her pulse as she at last approached the palace of the King. When it was made known that she had returned, the court was hastily assembled and she was admitted. The moment Aiden laid eyes on Kate he nearly wept with joy and relief. He had suffered the worst agonies of grief and remorse since the day she left on her perilous journey, and he swore to himself that he would never again let her go. Kate approached the throne, smiled happily at her beloved, and bowed extravagantly to his father.

"Well?" snapped the King. He tried to sound angry and forbidding, but his voice betrayed apprehension. "Did you succeed?"

"In a moment, Sire," said Kate. "First, a few presents from my trip." The crowd gasped as she opened the sack of gold and jewels she had acquired on her journey. She presented an emerald bracelet to the Queen, who accepted it as if it were a squashed insect; a ruby necklace to the Princess, who was much more gracious; and a diamond ring to the Prince. "For our engagement," she said, as she slipped it on his finger. His heart was in his mouth. Could she really have done it? "And for you, Sire," she said, reaching into her vest and pulling them out with a flourish, "Three golden feathers from the Griffin's tail." The assembly roared and the King's heart sank as he took the feathers. He handed them to the royal magician, who reluctantly confirmed that they were real. The Queen looked pleadingly at her husband, silently begging him to think of something, anything to keep Kate from marrying her son. He looked desperately to his gray-bearded advisors but they shrugged and shook their heads, empty of ideas. He looked to his son, whose determined gaze assured him that he intended to marry Kate even if it meant committing treason. His daughter seemed amused, but he knew she would stand by her brother. Finally he looked back at Kate, and he knew that a woman who could do the impossible as often as she had was not a woman to be trifled with.

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"You have done as I asked," he said, broken and defeated. Despair choked his voice. "You may marry my son."

There were cheers and cries of outrage. Kate and Aiden took each other in their arms and kissed passionately. The Queen wept, the Princess laughed, and the King buried his head in his hands.

They wasted no time and were married the following week. Some of the people in the realm were scandalized and some were delighted. Learned sages shook their heads and declared that a woman with so many "male humors" as Kate could never bear children. People began calling her Prince Kate — derisively at first, and then, as she won them over, affectionately. She never changed her blunt, masculine ways, but she was so good-natured and the two were so completely in love that even Aiden's parents began to come around. The King grudgingly began to admire her courage and plain speaking. The disapproving Queen had to struggle harder and harder to keep from laughing at Kate's off-color jokes. And when the birth of their first grandchild proved all the sages wrong, they were won over completely.

In time, the crown passed on to Aiden and Kate. Surrounded by their children, they ruled well and wisely — if a bit unconventionally — and remained in love until the end of their days.

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There's a sharp Russian curse that amounts to saying, "May your house always be remodeled." We don't know if Ms. Etchemendy ever heard it, but judging from this story, she probably agrees with the sentiment.

Nancy Etchemendy notes that her most recent book, a novel for young readers entitled The Power of Un, *is due out in paperback later this year.*

Demolition

By Nancy Etchemendy

DAVID CORWIN WALKED OUT of the rat-trap Spofford Apartment Building wearing his suit, his hardhat and his public smile. It didn't strike him as a particularly fateful moment, though it was.

Twenty or thirty picketers marched back and forth on the sidewalk in a wavering low-energy line, and many of the cars that passed on the busy street honked their horns in support. Most of the picketers — people with wrinkled faces and wrinkled clothes and sad or bitter expressions — had once lived in the Spofford Apartments. David strained to control his anger whenever he thought about the situation. One of the newspapers had called him "the man without a conscience." But that was a lie. He certainly did have a conscience, and it wasn't bothering him at all. The new condominium project with which he planned to replace this vermin-infested pit of decrepitude would be good for everyone. Good for the neighborhood, good for the new residents, good for the local businesses. As for the building's former residents, well, he and the company had done what they could to locate new quarters for them. It wasn't his

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fault some of them couldn't find anything affordable that made them happy.

His construction foreman and two members of the demolition crew cleared a path through the demonstrators for him. He didn't push anyone. In fact, he tried his best not to even touch anybody. Well, all right. Perhaps he did brush the elderly Chinese woman aside; after all, she was blocking his way and he couldn't get past her. But he didn't "push" her, as some of the newspapers later claimed. He couldn't understand why she fell to the ground, howling in pain. Her reaction seemed so far out of proportion to anything he had done that he thought she must be faking it, putting on a show to make him look bad. The picketers shouted and jeered and menaced him with their signs.

He reached down in a soothing gesture of goodwill, but someone pushed his hands away. He felt an oily film of sweat collecting on his forehead and upper lip, and in the little crease of his chin. It was all so chaotic. It made him want to run.

In the midst of all this jostling, he glanced up and found himself staring directly into the eyes of an old man in a traditional Chinese tunic. The fabric was worn, but he could see that it was silk and had once been a rich brocade. A long, braided, white beard and wispy hair framed his face. It was the old man's eyes, though, that really caught David's attention. They terrified him. They were black as space. When he looked into them, he grew dizzy and his head filled with images of places where stars flew apart from each other and entropy grew and even the rules of time could not be counted upon. Those eyes held a message, but what it was he couldn't guess.

The moment ended abruptly, and then David was hurrying into his Cherokee, locking the doors, jangling keys into the ignition, pulling away from the curb with an embarrassing scream of rubber because he'd given the engine more gas than he meant to. That was how the horrible unstitching of his life began.

David felt too shaken to return to the office. He used his cellular to call Betsy and tell her something unexpected had come up and he'd have to miss the several appointments scheduled for that afternoon. He drove around a while, cruising up and down the hilly streets. He told himself he

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was acting like a child, that a man of true stature wouldn't think twice about what had just happened.

His father would have said that David was in fact not a man of true stature. In life, his father had insisted on delivering pithy pronouncements regarding David's shortcomings — naiveté, unworthy goals, and sentimentality, among others. And he kept on delivering them, even from the grave. What wouldn't David do to shut that hurtful voice up once and for all?

He opened the driver's side window for a little fresh air. A pleasant breeze blew in off the bay. The clear sky was a delicate, milky blue. He took a deep breath, choked, closed the window again. Dead fish. The air was foul with it. Of course. The wharf lay between him and the cleanliness of the sea. That was always the way things seemed to go.

He swerved to avoid hitting a cable car, and nearly ran over a homeless person. Why couldn't anyone obey the traffic laws? He was sweating again, he realized. He needed to be away from here, away from the masses of unhappy people, and the filthy pigeons and the scabrous buildings. He needed to be home, where things were predictable.

He guided the Cherokee onto the freeway and headed south, removing his tie, wriggling out of his jacket. He turned the radio on, but found himself punching the buttons aimlessly. Finally, he gave up and switched the radio off again. He felt oddly out of balance, as if nothing was quite right.

Slowly the scenery outside the car windows turned from the gray and brown of the cityscape to the tidy pastels of the suburbs, and finally to the soft greens of grass-covered hills. He'd been thinking more and more often of moving his corporate headquarters from the city to one of the manicured campuses in the outlying towns. His advisors didn't care for the idea. They liked the central location of the financial district. His headquarters building itself was a glass and steel architectural showcase. Its impressive authority would be hard to match in the casual atmosphere of the suburbs.

But something about the city made his jaw stiffen and his shoulders ache. He wasn't a young man anymore. Middle-aged was the term; he couldn't deny it. Ashen streaks dulled his sandy brown hair, and the stubble he shaved from his chin each morning was nearly white. He

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found himself needing more and more time alone just to get through each day.

Halfway down the Peninsula, he left the freeway and followed a meandering road west through increasingly beautiful countryside dotted with trees and large, well-kept estates. He opened the windows, and this time the air that filled his nose and mouth tasted idyllically of grass, and flowers. Shortly, he turned into his own long, winding driveway.

He loved his property. Things stayed the same here from day to day, or changed at a sensible rate. He always knew what he would find — harmony, order — the oaks well trimmed, the road softly dusty or sweet with the smell of rain. He had designed the house and the grounds himself, and carefully supervised their construction, an accomplishment that gave him secret satisfaction. His father wouldn't have approved. Early on, he had discouraged David's interest in becoming an architect. Most architects were silly paupers, he'd said, and ended up as draftsmen in other men's offices. The design of buildings, and certainly of houses, was better left to individuals of lesser importance than the Corwins, even though David had a talent for it.

Like his car, David's house and garden were modest though he could have afforded opulence. Opulence came with a special set of problems. It attracted attention, and required social interactions that could otherwise be avoided — housekeepers, gardeners, gawking neighbors. He preferred the simplicity of a private life that could be managed without help.

As he rolled along the gravel drive, breathing his first sighs of relief at his escape from the city and the day's business, he realized that faint manifestations of wrongness had followed him home. Someone's unoccupied car was parked in front. He wasn't expecting company. He pulled into the garage, some distance from the house proper. Just as he stopped the engine, his phone rang. It was Betsy calling from the office.

"Mr. Corwin, I'm sorry to bother you, but I thought you might want to follow up on this. We just got a call from a reporter who says one of the elderly picketers at the Spofford — a Chinese woman apparently — suffered a heart attack and died at the hospital a few moments ago. He says there are witnesses who claim you and employees of The Corwin Group had a scuffle with her just before it happened. He left a number in case you want to make a statement."

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Blood surged warmly into his cheeks. Why couldn't people just leave him alone? Why were people forever blaming him for their problems? He couldn't hide his irritation. "I wish you wouldn't have bothered me with this, Betsy. Why can't you make reasonable decisions about when to call me and when not to?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I just thought 'no comment' might not be what you'd want to appear...."

"I don't care what appears. Whatever it is, it will be a lie anyway, no matter what I tell them. I'm not to be disturbed. Do you understand?"

"I...of course I...."

"Do you understand?"

"I understand, sir."

He hung up without a polite good-bye, detesting himself for the way he had treated her, trying to think of good reasons for his behavior and finding only the fact that he was a damaged person hidden behind careful appearances. Betsy would just have to take it in stride.

He got out of the Cherokee and slammed the door, thinking of a generous single-malt scotch on the rocks. Immediately the unfamiliar car in the driveway confronted him.

He stared at it for a moment, rubbing the back of his neck. He thought it must be an American-made sedan of some sort — a Chevrolet, a Ford perhaps. They all looked alike. It seemed fairly new, though its insipid bluish-silver paint had no luster. Except for the fact that it was parked in his driveway, it was wholly unremarkable.

David tried the handle on the front door of the house. It was unlocked. There was no sign of forced entry. He broke out in a fresh sweat. He could smell himself — something he disliked a great deal. With considerable trepidation, he stepped inside.

"David, is that you?" said a soft, bright voice.

The fragrances of garlic, onions, and roasting meat wafted from his kitchen. He peered through the doorway. A beautiful young woman stood at the sink peeling potatoes. She seemed to be wearing one of his dirty shirts and no pants at all, though she had tied one of his large, plain white dishtowels around her waist. Her hair curled in damp gold ringlets around a face as perfect as a peach. Her cheeks were flushed as if from heat, or perhaps from the glass of white wine at her elbow.

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He stood speechless, trying to decide which question to ask first. Do I know you? Why are you here? Why don't I have an erection?

An image of the old Chinese man from the crowd appeared abruptly in his mind. It was so clear that for an instant David literally could not see anything else. *You are about to have a taste of your own tea,* said the old man. He smiled as if satisfied with the progress of something, and then was gone.

A slight trembling began in David's fingertips. Within a few seconds, it had spread to his entire body.

"What are you doing in my house?" he demanded of the pretty blonde. "I don't know you. I've never seen you before in my life!"

A little gap appeared between the woman's upper and lower lips. A frown forced ridges into her forehead. "What are you talking about? You called me. You said you couldn't stop thinking about me and you wanted me to come over again." Her childlike voice grew louder. "I thought you'd like it...a little surprise, a decent meal. I went to a lot of trouble. The least you could do is say thanks!" She flung the potato peeler into the sink and glared at him.

"What kind of stunt are you trying to pull?" he shouted. "Who do you think you are? Get out of my house. Get out right now!"

But she was already fumbling with the knot in the dishtowel, tearing his shirt from her body. Expensive buttons flew in every direction. Christ, she was naked! Her skin was flawless, her breasts rosy with rage. David felt acutely aware of himself hanging limply inside his boxer shorts. What was the matter with him?

"Is this how you treat all the women who are stupid enough to let you fuck them? I've known some assholes in my time, but you're the worst by far, Junior!" She screamed it in his face, then whirled and stormed out of the house wearing nothing but oversized wool socks, which he thought he recognized as his own.

Junior? No one but his father had ever used that name on him. "What do you mean, *Junior*? Nobody calls me that and gets away with it! Nobody!" he yelled after her.

She was already in her car. She rolled down the window. "What's the matter with your dick? You think I don't see that you can't even get it up, you lying sack of shit? Junior junior junior junior!" she shrieked. Then she

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was gone in a shower of gravel and dust. He stood on the porch and watched until the unremarkable, unfamiliar automobile was no longer visible.

HE WENT BACK inside, trying hard to feel nothing. He knew he had an empty space within himself where things were always cool and orderly and balanced. Sometimes it was hard to find, but he reached it often enough. Scotch helped. He poured three fingers of Lagavulin into a glass with several ice cubes and started Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* on the sound system. He opened a few windows. Bird song and insects joined the dignified strains of the music in a moving, natural composition. He sipped the scotch and tried to clear his mind of everything except what he saw — the fine Shaker details of his little haven, a Cape Cod cottage: curtainless wood windows, pine wainscoting, pegs on the walls where he could hang the chairs when he swept the maple floors each day, the furniture spare and functional.

The woman had made a mess of his kitchen. He began to tidy up, obliterating as much of her presence as possible. But he couldn't stop thinking about her. He really had no recollection of ever having met her, let alone fucked her. Who was she? She must be crazy. He wondered if he should call the police. Then he thought of the hallucinatory image of the old Chinese man blathering about having "a taste of his own tea," and he thought, no, maybe he was better off keeping the whole thing to himself.

He had just washed and cut up the peeled potatoes (there were far too many) and put them in to roast with the meat when someone knocked on the door. His second scotch was already well underway, so he found it fairly easy to face this new, unwelcome interruption with the appearance of equanimity.

The man on his porch wore a rumpled, ill-fitting linen suit and a loud tie. He carried a vinyl-bound clipboard. His cheeks and nose had the unnaturally high color of a serious drinker.

Solicitors rarely bothered coming out this far. Nevertheless, David readied himself to resist an annoying sales pitch or a plea for charity of one sort or another.

"Is David Corwin at home?" said the man.

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"I'm David Corwin. Can I help you?" David smiled, not out of genuine goodwill, but because he knew charm usually worked better than abrasiveness for getting rid of people quickly.

"I'm Captain Janke with the SFPD." The man smiled and flipped open a wallet with a badge in it. At the same time, he handed David a business card almost as damp and rumpled as his suit.

David wondered dimly why a police captain from San Francisco would be wandering around this sparsely populated neighborhood miles from the city trying to drum up donations. It didn't make much sense, but then, very little about the day did make sense. "Well, I'm sorry you've come all this way," he said. "My company supports the San Francisco police generously. I, as a private individual, prefer to support my local police department."

"I don't think you understand, Mr. Corwin," said Captain Janke. There was something new in his voice. Something cool and professional and not especially friendly. "I'm here to ask you a few questions about the incident at the Spofford Apartments this afternoon."

Somewhere in his head, or perhaps in his belly, someone was kicking David, calling him a fool and an ass. But years of practice had taught him a hundred ways to hide it. He already knew the policeman's weakness.

He glanced quickly at the name on the business card, then smiled into the detective's watery eyes. "I'm sorry...Royce, is it? We get so many door-to-door solicitors out here in the suburbs." Which was a lie. Maybe they got a lot of solicitors in some neighborhoods, but not in this one. The houses were too far apart. He didn't know why he said it. Maybe because it was easy. "Please come in." He held the door open wide, and gestured Janke inside. "Would you care for a scotch?"

"No thank you, Mr. Corwin. I'm on duty." Janke averted his gaze from David's glass. "I won't be here long. Just a few routine questions."

"You're sure now?" said David. "Eighteen-year-old Lagavulin. Very smooth." He waved the glass close enough so Janke could smell it.

A small troubled look passed over Janke's face. He licked his lips slightly, looked down at his watch. "Well, I'll be going home after this. Maybe just a short one."

The short one turned into two doubles. The men sat in the front room on the only upholstered chairs in the house. David made short work of the

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hapless captain, who soon revealed to him that the District Attorney was considering manslaughter charges. He, Captain Janke, had come to investigate for himself rather than sending one of his subordinates, because David was such a prominent member of the community, and because of the political delicacy of the Spofford situation.

David said that the D.A. was blowing things out of proportion for understandable political reasons. David remembered the old woman, but he had no recollection of touching her, and hadn't seen any of his crewmen touch her either. The instant he said these things, he became convinced they were true. His father's insistence and long practice had taught him that, from a legal standpoint, this was the only safe thing to do — match his beliefs with whatever he found it necessary to say. He had done it so often in the past that he did it now without even realizing it. He could have passed a lie detector test.

He took another sip of Lagavulin, leaned back in his chair, and treated Janke to a convincing smile of jovial camaraderie. "How would the police department like a large donation of new equipment?" he said, as if it had just occurred to him in the deep goodwill of this moment. And it went on from there. Royce should call Betsy, here was the phone number, and give her a list of what they needed. Oh yes, of course, a pleasure, and if there's anything else, just call. You can count on David Corwin to do what's best for the community. Janke was grinning and very relaxed by the time he left.

David leaned against the door for a moment after he had closed it, his eyes shut tight and his insides roiling. He disliked bribing people, though he had done it often enough. It was one of many things he did in spite of hating them. He didn't seem able to help himself. He pounded softly on the oiled wood of the door, wondering whether his performance would have pleased his father.

He had bad dreams that night. In reality, the moon was still a week or more away from full, but in his dreams it hung like a giant silver gong, almost filling an otherwise featureless sky. Early on, he saw the old woman who had fallen in front of the Spofford. But instead of standing beside her on the pavement, he found himself seated at the controls of a bulldozer. There was no one else on the street, no one there to witness

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what might happen. He felt immensely angry and powerful as he scooped the woman up in the huge metal bucket. She made no sound, but the moon shone on her face, impossibly distorted with terror. He knew that in the context of this situation, it would be all right to kill her. No one could blame him. He was only doing it to win the approval of his father. And after all, he might still decide not to. But as he looked down at his hands, they moved the levers, slowly, irresistibly, even though he willed them to stop.

He rose to half-consciousness, awakened by his own partially swallowed scream, dimly aware that his sheets felt cold and damp. He lay still, looking out through the open dormer window across what he knew to be the garden, the meadow, and the woods beyond it. Dark, all of it, far too dark to decipher. Then the rhythm of cricket song bore him back into unpleasant sleep.

There he wandered down the stairs to the kitchen, where the strange woman stood naked, drinking wine and smearing food everywhere. She looked huge — much taller than David. He tried to stop her, but she held him at bay with one hand, laughing at his efforts to overcome her. The struggle went on and on, most of the night, it seemed. Toward morning, the old Chinese man appeared, his eyes blacker and emptier than ever, and asked David if he understood yet. But David most certainly did not understand.

He arose in the cool dawn, relieved to be awake. He enjoyed a long, warm shower, grateful for everything he touched. The soap with its familiar shape and clean scent, the polished brass razor he had used since young manhood, laid out neatly beside his shampoo and his mirror, the folded fluffy towels he always laundered himself so they came out just the way he wanted them. He smiled at the sight of his large closet, trousers hung from special hangers, shoes in their holders, shirts meticulously pressed.

He felt so fiercely happy to be free of the night's discomforts and so convinced of having imagined the woman visitor that he whistled as he hurried downstairs to make his morning espresso. But he stopped cold in the doorway. Something was wrong with the kitchen. It wasn't like his dream, or even like the previous afternoon. No stranger stood there, no food scraps littered the counters. It simply wasn't as he remembered it.

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The oven was on the wrong wall. The counters seemed a couple of inches higher than he was used to. He had to open every drawer before he found the silverware. The inside of the refrigerator had been rearranged. The fruit sat on the vegetable shelf; someone had poked the vegetables into random corners. A dozen eggs filled the space where he usually kept capers and yogurt. It took fifteen minutes to locate the coffee beans, ten to find the grinder, and another fifteen to discover the espresso maker hidden in a deep cabinet. There wasn't time to make the coffee. He was late.

He dealt with all this as if walking through fog. The kitchen was the only room that seemed to be affected. So he couldn't quite make himself believe it was really happening, especially after he climbed into the Cherokee and found everything there as it should be—his briefcase neatly organized; tapes for the stereo arranged alphabetically in their zippered case; plenty of gas in the tank. By the time he arrived at his office, he had convinced himself that it was all some strange trick of his mind, though a splitting headache attested to the fact that he really hadn't gotten his coffee.

The day passed without event. Captain Janke phoned from the Police Department and left a wish list of equipment, which Betsy transcribed dutifully and laid on David's desk. David couldn't help snorting a little as he looked at it. Pitiful, really. Some SWAT equipment, high-powered rifles, a couple of high-tech evidence collection kits—he doubted it would amount to more than fifteen or twenty thousand dollars. Janke clearly had no idea how important he was to the Corwin Group.

In the afternoon, he got a call from the foreman of his demolition crew, informing him that the old Spofford was now a heap of debris. A few days' cleanup, and the site would be ready for new construction. The picketers were gone and wouldn't be back. There was no longer anything left of their cause. A sort of peace descended on him.

He drove home at dusk with the windows down so the scent of watered lawns and distant wetlands filled the car. He watched the sunset with soft melancholy, wondering which of the other men he passed on the road were headed home to wives and children. He had never married. Oh, he had had a number of women, but none of them ever lasted very long. Sooner or later, they always moved things around, tried to change him in

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some way, or inserted themselves into private corners of his life. Sooner or later, they always turned him off to the point where he lost the ability to perform in bed for them. Then the relationship had to end; there was no other way. It was good that he'd never married. He wasn't cut out for it. Still, he sometimes wondered what it would have been like...if he had been different...if the world had been different.

As he rounded a bend perhaps a mile from his house, he passed a woman washing her car in the twilight. The car was parked in the driveway of an ostentatious Tudor on a piece of land too small for it. He slowed because he thought he recognized the woman and he couldn't imagine why. She was quite good looking. Her hair curled in damp gold ringlets...he applied the brakes hard...around a face as perfect as a peach. Even in the fading light, he knew that the automobile she polished was an insipid bluish-silver.

The woman looked up from her work. He saw the moment when she realized who was watching her. "Up yours, Junior!" she shouted, and made a gesture with her middle finger.

David drove on, trembling.

HE HAD SPENT the day carefully convincing himself that he'd imagined the events of the preceding twenty-four hours. So the kitchen startled him yet again. He found it even more disorienting than he had that morning. The oven had slid along the wall. A new doorway into the hall had appeared. A bar had materialized, and an island. The room had become impossibly cluttered with things that didn't belong there — upholstered stools, a piano, a bird cage. He jerked his head this way and that, wondering where they'd come from. He went outside and breathed slowly and deeply, but when he went back in, a new Waring blender and three China dolls had appeared.

Again he considered calling the police, but when he imagined the consequences, he changed his mind. "You say this is not your kitchen? And this furniture doesn't belong to you? Someone has been here and made modifications during the day, but there's no trace of forced entry anywhere. And no one has a key but you? You suspect a neighbor who you don't know or Chinese immigrants have something to do with it?"

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There wasn't even a name for this sort of crime. They would think he was crazy. Which he most certainly was not. He'd had a difficult few days, that was all. He was having a temporary perceptual problem, brought on by the stress of the Spofford situation. It would pass.

After an exhaustive search, he found the scotch and a glass. The roast meat and potatoes left over from the previous night's ridiculously large dinner had disappeared, but he discovered a package of frozen fish and chips in the freezer. Something was wrong with the oven; it didn't seem to be working. So he microwaved his frozen meal, feeling competent and resourceful. He ate the somewhat soggy outcome at the table on the back porch, looking out across a garden filled with late summer blooms and pungent herbs. A hummingbird worked late, and crickets chirped lustily.

He thought about his mother, who had died when he was very young. He had a lot of memories of her, more memories than were possible, his father had said. She had never used the name "Junior" on him. She had loved hummingbirds. She had called him Davey and ruffled his hair and said he was the most perfect boy in the world. As far as he knew, she was the only person who had ever loved him without wanting to change him, and she had left without warning. The pain was unimaginable. But he had eventually dealt with it, just as he had dealt with his evening meal, and would deal with the chaos that threatened him now.

When he had finished his dinner, he sipped a second scotch, sighing as warm relaxation flooded his blood. Things were never as bad as they seemed. Any problem could be overcome with a little creativity and wit. He wished the former residents of the Spofford had not been too dim to realize that.

He could never have imagined the days and nights that followed. Every morning after his shower, he descended the stairs to find the house more chaotic than before. The disorder spread to the entire ground floor. The rearrangement of his possessions was the least of it. Once he turned to go into the kitchen and ran into a blind wall. The walls moved as imperceptibly as forest animals, but they never seemed to be in the same place twice. Sometimes the sheetrock was missing, and he had to stare through two-by-fours at plumbing or wiring. He never knew whether he could find a toilet downstairs when he needed it, or whether it would be

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working if he did locate it. There was no dust; he almost would have found the usual debris of construction comforting. But the chaos was hard-edged and clean.

He dragged himself to work at the beginning of each day, and came home each evening, hoping stupidly that he would find things normal again. The residents of the Spofford haunted his sleep, as did his beautiful neighbor, and sometimes his dead parents. Every morning toward dawn, the old Chinese man asked David if he understood yet. At first, David thought he understood perfectly. He was being made to suffer, unfairly, for doing something the Spofford residents and their sympathizers didn't approve of. They had hired this Asian magician, or whatever he was, to wreak vengeance on David. David hadn't done anything wrong. In fact, he'd been generous! The whole thing was absurd.

He wandered around the house at odd hours, ranting at the unfairness of it. Then he offered the magician money. That didn't work. He played what he thought of as his trump card. "All right! I regret it. I regret having torn down the Spofford. Are you happy now?" he shouted. But even that was ineffective. Without explanation, the torment continued. After a while he couldn't stop himself from throwing things — dishes, glasses, a clock, even knives. Eventually the fury changed into a dull pain that left him brooding in the dark, far, far into each night, a case of scotch near at hand. Maybe he didn't understand after all. But how could he? It became a deeper and deeper mystery.

The upstairs bathroom, his morning haven of rationality and comfort, was the last to go. He staggered out of his bed, which had somehow become wedged into the guest room during the night. There was no door, but he found a narrow opening in the wallboard that led into the hallway, dim in the colorless dawn and filled with incongruous objects — his grandmother's trunk, an Exercycle, brooms and shovels that belonged in the garage. From there he found the doorway to his bedroom, slightly to the left of where it ought to be.

The room was completely bare. His clothes had disappeared from the closet, and he had to mount a barefooted search to find them. They were piled downstairs in the sitting room on a table he had never seen before. He stood there in the spot where he had once enjoyed small breakfasts of toast and fruit while gazing east through the sunny window to the garden.

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Today the sun was not yet up, but even if it had been, it wouldn't have lit the room. A door had come off its hinges and was propped across the window. The flooring was gone, and he had to pick his way carefully across exposed joists to reach the clothes. He pulled a pair of slacks and a shirt from the pile. He was still fairly composed when he reached his bedroom again and found his way to the bathroom.

But he turned on the light and discovered the shower stacked with books. The towels were gone, and an odd array of junk — pencils, scissors, can openers — had replaced the usual contents of the medicine cabinet. He couldn't find the soap. God only knew where his razor and shaving cream were.

Dressed in nothing but two-day-old underwear, he leaned on the sink before the mirror, afraid to look at himself. Slowly at first, then faster, his tears spattered porcelain that had grown grimy because he could no longer find the scouring powder. The last vestige of order had disappeared from the comfortable cocoon of his private life. For the first time, it occurred to him that some adversities might really be insurmountable. Maybe it was true that he had done something terrible to the residents of the Spofford. He must make amends. Surely this was what the old Chinese man had meant each time he asked, "Do you understand yet?" Surely, if he made things right again, his torment would end.

On his way to work, David tried to find a drugstore where he could purchase disposable razor blades and a can of shaving cream. But it was still too early in the day. Nothing was open yet. It was all he could do to hold back a second bout of tears. What kept him going was the conviction that soon, after he had done his penance, his old life would be returned to him.

When he arrived at the office, Betsy raised an eyebrow and asked him if everything was all right.

He stood in the doorway, excruciatingly aware of how he must look to her. Aside from the fact that he obviously hadn't shaved or showered, he knew there were dark smudges under his eyes from too little sleep and too much liquor. His clothes were rumpled. And he needed an Irish coffee so badly that he trembled. Nothing was all right. But to admit such a fact seemed unthinkable.

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An image flashed through his mind of a man in a suit of thick, heavy armor. He'd developed huge muscles from the effort of supporting its weight. He was very strong. But his enemy had unhorsed him, and the armor was so heavy that he couldn't get up. He searched frantically for the buckles and fastenings, but he couldn't find them. He didn't even know where to look. So there he lay on the green grass, trying to act brave while he waited for his foe to trample him.

Why didn't the knight call for help? David wondered. His father answered him. Because a man of true stature didn't need help.

David thought for just a moment of what it would be like if his father were wrong. What would happen if he answered Betsy in some way no one could have predicted? Betsy, I don't know what to do. I don't know where to turn. Help me find my buckles.

But the moment passed. "Of course everything's all right," he said.

She tried to talk to him about the day's appointments and other morning business as she fixed him a cup of coffee the way he had once liked it, two heaping sugars, no cream.

"Cancel my morning appointments. Something's come up," he said.

"Are you sure, sir? We've canceled so many appointments lately...."

"Stop asking me if I'm sure! Of course I'm sure," he said, precisely because he wasn't.

He went into his office, closed the door, splashed whisky into his coffee. He rolled up his sleeves and sipped it, hands trembling, while he gazed alternately at the cityscape below and at the large veins that ran down his arms and across his wrists. Not his style, he thought, feeling rather detached. A man of true stature would use a gun. He closed his eyes and shook his head briefly.

When the coffee had soothed and sharpened him a little, he sat down at his desk and began to make phone calls one after another without stopping. First he contacted Corwin Realty and put a hold on all further efforts to sell the new condominiums that would soon rise from the ruins of the old Spofford Apartments. Then he called the previous owner of the Spofford, who gave him the name of the property manager, who gave him the name and number of Amos Pendleton, who had supervised the building for years in return for $500 a month and free rent. But when David

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dialed Amos Pendleton's phone number, he got a brief recorded message saying it was no longer in service.

With a small, stinging pain in his stomach, he called a private investigator he had used a few times for the court cases which came up with depressing regularity in the dealings of The Corwin Group.

"I want to contact all the residents of the Spofford Apartments and offer them living arrangements on the site of the old building," said David.

The man on the other end of the line whistled theatrically. "That's a pretty tall order. It'll take time and money, and there's a possibility we won't have a hundred percent success."

"I'm less concerned about the money than I am about the time. If you have to hire assistants, I'll pay for them. I don't care what it takes." He had to steady himself on the edge of the desk. He realized with chagrin that his voice sounded shrill.

"We'll do our best, sir," said the investigator. "I'll get right on it."

THE AFTERNOON ground along in the usual aggravating series of surprises and obstacles. The continuous stream of unforseen problems and unexpected developments was an aspect of his profession that he had never liked and now found almost intolerable. In the past, he had taken pleasure in drifting off now and then in the midst of the workaday chaos, dreaming briefly and with a small smile of the quiet, inviting order of his house and garden. His private life had been a refuge, a buffer that kept him strong and calm. But the buffer no longer existed. Home had grown worse than anything he dealt with while away from it. And when he thought about it now, instead of cool respite, he felt an itchy, terrifying discomfort, as if he were trying to contain a seething mass of angry ants in a paper box.

At three o'clock, he called the private investigator again.

"Well, have you made any progress?" he said.

There was an uncomfortable silence at the other end of the line, and a sound like a sigh. "Sir, we're working as fast as we can. It's difficult."

David stood up behind his desk, his eyes closed. He saw the ants emerging in ragged columns from tiny holes they had chewed in the box. He saw that the ants were as black as the eyes of the old Chinese man. What if there was no way to find the people whose lives he had thrown into

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disarray? What would happen to him if he failed at the only penance he could think of?

"You're a professional!" said David. It took great effort to unclench his jaw enough to make himself intelligible. "If you can't manage this, just tell me now, and I'll hire someone who can."

"Mr. Corwin," said the investigator, "If anyone can do this, I can. But I'm not a magician. These are not the kinds of people who leave forwarding addresses. This sort of thing takes time and luck."

David slammed the receiver into its cradle. A piece of plastic flew across the room. He noticed with disgust that his hand left dark streaks of sweat on the matte black surface of the handset. He also noticed that his desk accessories — the brass paper weight, his pen holder and pens, his blotter and business cards — had rearranged themselves.

He backed away from the desk and hurried into the outer office, where Betsy raised her eyebrows at him again. Her hair seemed slightly darker than it had that morning, and the furniture had moved closer to the window.

"Is everything all right, Mr. Corwin?" she asked.

In his head, David screamed, *What do you think? Does everything look all right to you?*

But in fact he rushed from the office without saying a word. He took the stairs to the street; he couldn't bear the thought of enclosing himself in an elevator. Outside, the din of buses, jackhammers, car stereos, and aggressive panhandlers fell on him like a bucket of glass. He ran toward the parking structure where he had left the Cherokee that morning. But the parking structure had become an office building. He had to endure forty-five minutes of sweat-drenched wandering before he finally found his car in a parking lot he didn't recall ever having seen before.

He climbed into the Cherokee, closed the door with a solid thunk, and sat very still. The inside of the car seemed to be all right. The key slipped easily into the ignition. His tapes waited for him, still alphabetically arranged in their case. He inhaled the reassuring smell of well-conditioned plastic as if it were expensive perfume. Slowly, the small, dependable environment of his car soaked into him and he felt the disorder of the day retreat a little. He started the engine, turned on the air conditioning, and began to drive.

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The city streets were hard to recognize and made the well of chaos threaten once again. He didn't plan to — he was far beyond planning — but he found an entrance to the freeway and took it. The thick asphalt cords that led from the city southward were still wonderfully right. After a few moments of steady, smooth speed on a road he knew, relief spread through him like a bath. He smiled slightly. It felt peculiar because of the stubble and the stiffness of dried sweat on his face. He started a tape of Bach performed on the great pipe organ in Leipzig. Bach, the master of logical sound. And he hummed gleefully as he guided the car along the graceful arabesques of bridges and interchanges. Eventually, he found his way to the coast highway.

He drove down it for a long time, stopping now and then to pull off and stare over the cliffs at the rugged surf below. He wasn't sure why he did it, or what he was thinking. Whenever a few thoughts gathered in his head, he became frightened and had to hum passages from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Somewhere inside him lived a child who kept saying things like, "We could do this. It would be easy. It would be like going to sleep and never having to dream anymore." When he hummed Bach, the child grew silent. The humming also kept the old Chinese man and his bottomless eyes and his furious ants from materializing in David's mind. Most important of all, it kept him from facing the fact that he had to go home again. Before he could proceed with other matters, whatever they might be, he had to make certain that his sanctuary was really beyond saving.

The sun hung dully orange near the abyss of the Pacific Ocean as he headed north again. By the time he turned inland toward home, night had arrived. By the light of a full moon, he drove ever more slowly along the narrow road toward his house. The countryside had about it the feel of an autumnal dream, the grassy hills all silver and the trees hugely black, obstructing the stars. He passed the Tudor house where the beautiful woman lived. The windows were dark and empty. Bach failed him then, and unable to stop himself, he thought about the life he had led, hemmed and pinched by his own fears, by self-imposed blindness, by arrogance. Where had it taken him? To a carefully constructed house, carefully empty of every threat, but also of every deep joy: friends, lovers, children, everything most men would cultivate with the wisdom of instinct,

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knowing those were the only real marks anyone could ever leave on the bright, burning face of the world.

He stopped in front of the Cape Cod and got out of his car feeling battered to the point of numbness. In the moonlight he saw large, dark holes in the roof where the shingles were gone and the rafters gleamed like bones. The front door was either open or missing altogether, delineated by a featureless, dreary rectangle.

He walked up the front steps slowly, feeling almost asleep. The door was indeed open, and he stepped through it. Inside, the chaos seemed complete. Half-finished walls rose up at random. Some corners were packed with crazily tilted furniture, while others lay empty, opening out into expanses of barren floor in every treacherous stage of demolition. The moon shone through a window that was too small and too far to the north, into what had once been the sitting room. He heard soft creaks and rustlings as the pointless rearrangement continued around him.

On a wooden bench he had made with his own hands at some impossibly remote point in the past lay something shiny. He moved toward it in a slow, tightening spiral as if pulled by gravity. It was a gun.

He sat down beside it and picked it up. Memories flooded him like deep, cold water rushing through damaged seawalls. He recognized the weapon as a pistol his father had brought home from a trip to Italy. He recalled standing in the meadow behind the huge house where he had grown up, his father big and loud and sour-smelling, impatient because David was too small and weak to work the action and chamber the first round.

The metal, intricately incised with leaves and flowers, had a brilliant sheen to it even in this light. It cooled his hands and weighed them down with ominous power. A box of cartridges sat on the bench like an invitation. He opened it.

He loaded the gun, wondering at first if he were dreaming. But he couldn't have been. Half repelled by the oily feel of the lead bullets, he remembered very clearly how to push the heavy cartridges into the clip one by one; remembered the satisfaction of slipping the full clip into its perfect space in the gun's handle. This time, he was more than strong enough to pull back the slide. He remembered thinking, as a boy, that he could use this gun to free himself from his father. Remembered aiming it

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at the back of the big bald head, and lowering it again, submerged in self-loathing. Why had he felt that way? Which shame was greater — contemplating the act, or failing to carry it out?

Now he held the gun between his knees with both hands, the safety off, his finger resting lightly on the trigger. He looked through the window to the garden, a wild tangle of light and shadow that had become weirdly overgrown since he last tended it. What difference would it make if he were gone? No one would miss him. Any number of people would be glad. He hated himself; was afraid of the only future he could imagine, continuous irrational change where there were no walls to protect him, no predictable routines to keep him from looking at himself and seeing what he did. Just beyond the reach of words lurked a truth so terrifying he thought it would be better to die than grasp it.

David pressed the muzzle of the gun against his temple. He swallowed and told himself to pull the trigger. Pull the trigger and stop the pain. Pull the trigger and find the cool release of oblivion.

Far down in the core of him, something began to scream. Against his will, his mind filled with pictures of all the things he would never do again. Never shave, with or without the brass razor. Never watch another sunrise. Never taste coffee, smell a field of grass on a summer night, hear a mockingbird sing. Never fuck a beautiful woman, in the moonlight, in the sunshine, in darkness, by the glow of a lamp, never again.

Something inside him unclenched. Yes. He had fucked his beautiful blond neighbor. On several occasions. That was the right word. Fucked. There was no love involved, at least not on his part. He liked each of these joinings less than its forerunner, because she gave him more and more of herself while he offered her less and less. Why torture himself by remembering it? It was his usual pattern, not his fault, not anything he could change. But if even a wall could change itself...

A terrible tightness radiated from his chest, an ache that ran from his breastbone through his throat to the top of his head, a searing heat behind his eyes. If even a wall could change itself...

He became aware of the trigger against his finger. He had begun to pull it. The trigger had begun to move. *It's out of my hands,* he thought. *None of this is my fault,* and for the first time noticed the absurdity of his position.

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Laughing softly, he lowered the gun. After a time, the laughter melted into tears. The tears became sobs that hurt like knives pulled from flesh. He looked down at his hands and saw that they were moving — not in any recognizably human way, but as if large beetles crawled just beneath the skin. Inside the cavity of his chest, the hollow of his skull, he felt things crumbling, bursting, rearranging themselves.

He rolled across the bare floorboards, tearing at his ears and hair. Pain consumed him. He became unaware of anything but its demanding heat and brilliance. When it left him, suddenly and completely, he thought he was dead.

David sat up in the patch of milky light from the moon, feeling empty and quiet. The old Chinese man appeared in front of the window and stooped to pick up something from the shadows — the pistol. He emptied it, threw the clip and the box of cartridges through a hole in the floor, tossed the gun out the window into the garden. He said nothing at all.

The light was bad, the old man's mustache unkempt. His expression was impossible to decipher with any certainty. But David guessed that as the old man disappeared, he might have been smiling.

The house continued to rustle and sigh as if a horde of mice were demolishing it nibble by nibble. David looked down at himself, expecting to see his clothes soaked with blood, and his skin ruptured. But he seemed miraculously whole.

He stood up carefully, feeling as if he knew nothing about the body he had lived in all his life. He stumbled through the front door and stood a moment under a night sky dotted with faint stars and moonlit clouds. He needed help. What if he asked for it and it was denied? Who would want to help a man who behaved the way he had? Who knew him well enough to care? He had sheltered himself almost perfectly.

He glanced behind himself at the murmuring ruins of his once immaculate house. He walked down the lonely drive to the main road, where he turned toward the Tudor and the woman who called him Junior and had once fled from him wearing only his socks. There was no going back. Anything seemed possible. Anything at all.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

NOT YOUR AVERAGE JOE... OR FILMMAKER

(Author's note: I am assuming that most of you, dear readers, have already seen both Unbreakable *and* The Sixth Sense. *But since both films contain an unfolding plot that leads to a shocking revelation, I should warn you that although the following column does not contain out-and-out "spoilers," I will nonetheless tell you more than you really ought to know before seeing the films. So, those of you just freed from two years in a cave, feel free to set this review aside, rent and watch both very fine movies, and get back to me.)*

COMIC books make lousy live-action movies — and I am, as you well know, not the first (or only) critic to make this observation. The problem is that most filmmakers who try to translate highly stylized panel art into flesh-and-blood adventure get too hung up on the look of the comic book, to the detriment of the thematic content. So they usually end up completely bypassing all subtlety in storytelling, and, instead, immerse their films in zap-pow action and garish colors (or deep monochromatic shadows).

In short, they try to make a cartoon with actors. What idiocy!

If you want to make a cartoon, then hire a team of animators. Add realistically violent/sexual content and complex ideas, if you like — as the masters of Japanese anime have so ably done — but don't make some poor actor parade around in too much makeup and costume, spouting nonsense and leaping buildings in a single bound.

Consciously or not, dramatic features based on comic books almost always lapse into awkward buffoonery and self-parody. They

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lose the truth in the trappings, and leave viewers like myself wondering why they bothered. (That is, besides the obvious reason of making a quick buck on name recognition, and striking it rich on an action figure merchandising bonanza.)

Filmmakers who are too conversant in studio-think don't get this. (Or, just as likely, simply don't care.) But a young "outsider," India-born and Philadelphia-based filmmaker M. Night Shyamalan, does get it. And he just as obviously cares about his craft. Shyamalan comprehends the serious, and mythic, heart of the comic book, and knows how to bring it to life. And after the goldmine of his breakout film, *The Sixth Sense*, Hollywood was willing, for once, to let him tell his story the way it should be told.

Shyamalan's new film, *Unbreakable*, is, for all intents and purposes, book one of a very modern comic book series, rendered not in drawn panels but in the powerfully realistic images of a somber, suspenseful drama.

David Dunn (Bruce Willis) is a stolid security guard who has withdrawn from his life so far that his wife, Audrey (Robin Wright Penn), can no longer see the point of their marriage. They live on different floors of their old Philadelphia row house. And they are contemplating a more clear-cut split.

On his way home by train from a job interview in New York, David awkwardly flirts with the woman in the next seat, but comes off so creepy that she hastens away from him. The next thing he knows, he is sitting, dazed but unharmed, on a hospital gurney, being quizzed by a doctor. It seems that David is the (soon to be) sole survivor of a horrendous train crash.

Just in these opening scenes we are given reason enough to love and respect M. Night Shyamalan. Most directors would have staged that train wreck, in all its screeching, crashing, blood-spilling gory (I mean, glory). We would have heard the wails of the injured, and seen more than we wanted to of fire, torn metal, and dismembered body parts. But Shyamalan expresses the horror in David's stunned face, and in a simple image at the bottom foreground of the same shot. In the neighboring room, the largely unseen and mortally wounded other "survivor" is ministered to by emergency personnel. But to no avail. While David and the doctor talk, the nearby labored breathing stills, and the white at the bottom of the frame turns crimson.

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The rest of the movie progresses with just this level of subtlety and quiet power. After a memorial service for the crash victims, David returns to his vehicle to find a note under the wiper. It asks "How many days in your life have you been sick?" And that question starts David on a reluctant journey of self-discovery. But, first, it leads him to the writer of the note. His name is Elijah Price (Samuel L. Jackson), a collector of comic books and a dealer in comic art. Elijah, born with an affliction called osteogenesis imperfecta, has bones as fragile as the glass cane that he carries. As brittle as his body is, Elijah believes (in the logic of the popular culture genre he so loves) that his opposite must also exist. There must be a man so resilient as to be unbreakable. And he believes that he has found that man in David.

Dunn, at first, angrily rejects Elijah's theories. Still, he can't help but rethink the events of his life. Or, rather, think about them fully, for the first time. Obviously, most men would easily be able to remember if they had been sick or injured. But David cannot, because for all of his life, he *would* not. He is a man deep in denial of his own powers. Invincible? Psychic? He doesn't want to hear about it. His avoidance of his abilities is so complete that he seems to avoid life altogether. (No wonder his wife and son are heartbroken by what they perceive as his emotional rejection of them.)

It is the frail, freakishly intense Elijah who awakens the sleepwalking Dunn, against his own will. Jackson is (as you would expect) brilliant as the film's catalyst and heroic foil. The guy oozes intelligence and (barely) tamped-down fury, and his natural elegance is only enhanced by the ill-shaped fro and decided limp he favors in the role of Elijah.

Bruce Willis is another matter. Willis is, undeniably, a very likeable performer. And he does have an ordinary joe quality that can bring believability to heroic roles. (His work in the *Die Hard* movies was a real turning-point in adventure films. He brought a "regular guy" truth to a genre that had, by the mid-eighties, devolved — in the work of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone — into ridiculous exercises of garish hypermasculinity.) But if you take away Willis's street-smart swagger and his wise-ass smirk, he has few tools left with which to create a performance. I thought that he was ultimately unconvincing as a

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psychiatrist in *The Sixth Sense*. And in *Unbreakable*, although he does a fine job portraying a working-class palooka, he isn't really capable of the layered performance the role requires.

We should be able to see, in David, a man at once willfully muted and withdrawn, and yet, on a subconscious level, all too painfully aware of his hidden strengths. Willis just seems catatonic much of the time. All I can say is that Shyamalan's story-telling is so strong that Willis's shortcomings, in both *Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable*, cannot irreparably mar either film.

I can certainly understand Shyamalan's loyalty to his star. When Willis signed on to *Sixth Sense*, he made the movie possible. [Shyamalan's two previous films, *Praying with Anger* (1992) and *Wide Awake* (1997) had both gone nowhere fast, and the young filmmaker was far from Hollywood's golden boy.] Bruce's star power also gave *Sixth Sense* a large opening weekend audience — something Shyamalan's muted ghost story clearly needed, before word-of-mouth could snowball, and make the film a deserved hit.

Willis's star-power, no doubt, also helped to open *Unbreakable*. Yet, in the long run, I can't help but believe that the film would have been better served by an actor capable of more depth. And speaking of depth, Robin Wright Penn, a very gifted actor with an impressive performance range, is sorely wasted in the underdeveloped role of Dunn's wife Audrey. (The women in *Sixth Sense* are much more interesting. Could that be the influence of comic book culture?)

No matter. Despite underwritten supporting roles and an underacted lead performance (as well as, at times, too ponderous a pace), I must say that I was very impressed with *Unbreakable*.

Anyone who knows and loves comic books should not miss this film. For *Unbreakable* honors the spirit of the formula, without pastiche or condescension. It is like the first issue of some great (unknown) comic book, come completely to life.

But even if you have never read a comic book or graphic novel, you should fully be able to appreciate the cinematic skills of Night Shyamalan, as evidenced here, as well as his considerable skill as a yarn-spinner. Time and again, I marveled at the way Shyamalan set out his tale. Cheap violence and knee-jerk action scenes just don't

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enter into this young man's filmic vocabulary. He takes his time, believing in his characters and his story.

Although it does have a (fairly hinted-at) shocking denouement, *Unbreakable* is nothing like *The Sixth Sense*. This fact has disappointed many (and will disappoint more). To me, both films are equally strong examples of moviemaking. And, in much different ways, they explore the same thematic territory.

Without pandering to audience expectations, or getting caught up in his own sleight of hand, Shyamalan confronts several serious issues in both films. How do we come to understand the nature of our own "life"? How can we learn to embrace our destiny? Little Haley Joel Osment has to accept his frightening "gift" and finally open himself up as a conduit of communication for the dead. He has to learn to use his power in active, positive ways, and in so doing, make peace with himself. When he accepts his responsibility to bear witness and provide help to others, his fear abates.

So it is with *Unbreakable*'s David Dunn. Once he embraces his heroic fate, he can dispel the sadness to which he had awakened every day of his adult life. David doesn't need a rubber suit or a satin cape to become a superhero. A plastic rain poncho works just fine. The transformation is on the inside. And it's all about self-acceptance of his own extraordinary nature.

Balding or not, David Dunn is far from an Ordinary Joe. In telling his story, M. Night Shyamalan has proven, again, that he too is far from run-of-the-mill. He is a writer and director of singular talent.

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As we've seen before, Robert Reed is very adept at imagining the future of humanity. Here's a tale that demonstrates he's just as good at considering our current nature.

Season to Taste

By Robert Reed

IT WAS AN ACCIDENT, coming across that little recipe box. Chester wanted a camera. Some guy had just called to ask if he had any old .35 mm for sale, and Chester said, "Sure, come on over." Except he wasn't feeling so sure about it now. Somewhere in the house was a nice camera complete with its original leather case and light meter. He could remember putting it in a certain box in the basement. That was where Chester kept most of his inventory, in the basement. He had all kinds of cardboard boxes down there. On shelves, on the floor. Stacked head-high, in places. But the camera wasn't where it belonged, and it wasn't in the box under that first box, or in any of the boxes surrounding it. Later, speaking in her sweetest voice, Evelyn would remind him that he'd sold the camera last fall, for eight dollars and change, and maybe he was remembering things a little cockeyed. Which wasn't all that unusual, of late. But the thing that mattered — what caught his eye, then his emotions — was the old recipe box, a tarnished brass clasp holding it shut, cheap pine badly stained and its design simple without being elegant,

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someone long ago having burned the word RECIPES into its slightly warped, very yellowed lid.

"Where did we get *this*?" he asked his wife.

Evelyn was chopping up an onion. Her gray eyes lifted for an instant, then dropped again. Her hands never stopped working the knife. "I don't know," she told Chester. "Where did you find it?"

He showed her. The recipe box had been tucked inside a little wicker basket that had gotten shoved behind all of his boxes. He placed the basket and its round lid on the kitchen counter, saying, "One of us must have bought it, then forgot to look inside." That was his current theory, but easily amended. "Did you buy this? Do you remember where?"

"I told you. No." She was watching the onion become a pile of clean white segments. "Why? What's gotten into you?"

"Here, I'll show you!" With a dramatic flourish — Chester had a gift for drama — he turned the clasp and opened the box, fishing out a random recipe typed on a stiff and yellowed three-by-five card. With a voice growing louder by the syllable, he read, "'Vengeance Stew. Two pounds of meat cut from your enemy's buttocks, plus, preferably, his tongue. Cube the meat. Coat in flour, pepper, salt. Brown in a Dutch Oven!'"

"What are you talking about?" Twenty years of marriage, and sometimes, bless her, Evelyn would ignore his ravings. "It sounds like a recipe for stew — "

"'Vengeance Stew,'" he repeated. He roared. "'Meat cut from your enemy's buttocks, plus preferably, *his tongue.*'"

Her mouth closed, the gray eyes big as saucers.

"All right. Here's another one." Thick fingers found a three-by-five card worn ragged at the corners. "'Meat Loaf from a Loaf. Canned tomatoes. Rolled oats. One egg. Onion. Salt. Pepper. And one-and-a-half pounds of ground chuck from a lazy, no-good man.'" Chester lowered the card, his face bright and red — as if a light bulb burned behind his cheeks. "Well," he exclaimed. "Do you undersand *now*?"

"Where did you find that? In one of your boxes?"

"Behind the boxes. I told you." He shoved the card into its slot, then pulled out a fresh example. "'Sweet Potato Shepherd's Pie. Onion. Garlic. Jalapeno peppers. Cumin. Chili powder. Oregano. Two pounds of ground

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young shepherd' — Jesus! — 'although any young man from animal husbandry will serve nicely.'"

Evelyn touched the small box, for an instant. Three dabs of onion juice began to dry against the old wood.

"'Donner Party Pot Pie,'" Chester read aloud, flipping wildly through the cards. "'Rump Roast. From a well-fed matron.' I'm getting sick here, Ev! 'Swiss Steak and Gravy.' Oh, but we can use an Austrian in a pinch. Thank goodness!"

"It must be a joke," Evelyn whispered.

"And a damn funny one, too." Chester pushed the box away, trying to avoid the temptation of reading more recipes. "Are you sure you didn't buy this wicker basket? Take a good look."

She played with the round wicker lid, then set it on the basket, examining the drab ensemble until she could say, without a trace of doubt, "I didn't buy this."

"Then I must have." He didn't have Evelyn's memory. For Chester, life had always meant lists and reminders, and since turning sixty-five, it seemed that yesterday and last year were the hardest things to remember. If he had bought this basket last year, which seemed likely, then there were only a few hundred garage sales to choose from. Plus dozens of auctions, too. They bolstered their income through buying and selling other people's refuse. And their inventory was vast, explaining why nobody had opened the basket, why the curse box had escaped their gaze for so long...

Again, but with more force, his wife told him, "This is all a joke. A stupid, childish joke." She shut the box and fastened the brass clasp. "You can't possibly believe — "

"In this day and age? Everything's possible!"

The chopped onion lay forgotten on the cutting board. Dinner was delayed, which was fine with Chester. He had lost his appetite. He might never eat again.

"I don't know what to do," he confessed. "If I ran to the police, what would I tell them?"

Always reasonable, Evelyn said, "Just what you know, which is almost nothing."

Fighting revulsion, he grabbed the box, flinging it open and pulling

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out a final card. Like every other recipe, it was typed neatly, the *p* missing its stem and the *k* floating above its neighbors. Like every three-by-five card, this card was miscolored and stiff, but its corners were extra frayed, obviously from heavy use. A favorite recipe, he reasoned. Which made it all the more shocking when he read aloud, "'Lemon Veal Scallopini. Flour. Garlic salt. Veal' — Oh, dear Lord! — 'from infants restrained with silk and fed ample buttermilk.'"

"It's someone's insanity," Evelyn whispered. "Leave it alone."

And Chester tried to believe her. He would have given anything to think these were just crazy words on paper, harmless by any measure. Yet he couldn't. He couldn't quit thinking about the recipes — stewing, so to speak — until at three in the morning, all of the sudden, he sat up in bed, knowing where he must have bought that box. Of course, of course...of course...!

AN OLD FARMSTEAD some eighty minutes from home, it had a large, unkempt yard adorned with metal sheds and a sagging barn and an enormous garage. Every structure was elderly, showing rust and rot that a careful, decent man would never allow. That was one reason Chester had remembered this place. This county had a reputation for hillbillies. It was a corner of the state that Evelyn normally avoided, where Chester hunted alone for the best deals. But today was an exception. His wife must have sensed something at breakfast. Meeting him at the pickup, she merely shrugged when he mentioned where he was going, telling him, "I don't want to stay home." Why not? "Because that fellow is going to come over looking for a camera, and I don't want to have to tell him that you already sold it."

Chester laughed despite himself. No doubt about it, she was quite a wife. His first and only true love. He found himself thinking about the benefits in marrying in middle-age. All your youth and stupidity is spent and gone, which makes life a lot easier. The truth of it was that Chester was glad for the company, particularly when he pulled up in front of the hillbilly house. Particularly when his nervous energy began to ebb, replaced with a big dollop of fear.

"You said there was a sale here. A special Tuesday sale." Evelyn threw

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his lie back at him. "It doesn't even look like anyone's home. Not for several months, judging by appearances."

Which might not be bad news, he told himself. Provided there wasn't a pack of dogs waiting in ambush.

"Where did you hear about this sale?"

Chester opened his door, then said, "Maybe I'm wrong. Stay here, and I'll go see."

"Maybe I'll come with you, and we'll both see."

"No." He paused, looking at the gray eyes and the strong plain face. Then he said, "Wait here. I'll just be a few minutes." And after a brief silence, he added, "If anything should happen, get help. Okay? Promise me?"

She sat motionless, and mute. Emotion made her look younger than her years. Chester could practically see the bride whom he had married.

Walking toward the ramshackle house, he played with scenarios. It was possible that he hadn't bought the wicker basket and recipe box here. That he was wrong despite a very clear memory. And it was very likely that the seller had bought the basket elsewhere, and just like Chester, he never knew what he had in his possession.

It was important to give the man his chance to explain.

Being fair was essential.

Jokes or not, those recipes were evidence of a sick, twisted mind. That's what Chester was telling himself, for the umpteenth time, watching a fellow that he halfway remembered, watching him shuffle out onto the broad and sagging front porch.

"Hello, friend," said a thick, unfriendly voice.

Chester offered a quick nod, then forced himself to speak. "I'm out shopping...for a typewriter, actually...and I remembered that you've got a good selection...you know, of all sorts of things..."

The man on the porch was thick like his voice, and strong in a casual, bearish way. Tired jeans and a faded Hawaiian shirt made an interesting fashion statement. He had the bright amoral eyes of a squirrel. "I'm not selling today," he warned. Then some base instinct took hold, and he said, "A typewriter, huh? Yeah, I got a few. Out in the garage. What sort you huntin' for?"

They walked in the same direction, but not together. Chester fought the urge to look over his shoulder at Evelyn. "A manual typewriter," he

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managed. "Nothing fancy." He was volunteering too much, but he couldn't help it. "It's for my grandson, frankly. He wants an old typewriter so he can write just like Hemingway."

If the name meant anything to the gent, it didn't show. A burly arm jerked open a rusting door. Inside the huge garage were maybe half a dozen trucks and cars in various stages of being stripped or put back together again. The lone working vehicle — an old flatbed truck — was carrying a big V-8 engine over its rear axle, a greasy canvas tarp thrown over it.

Chester gave that engine a quick look, realizing that it was the youngest thing inside this garage.

Exactly two typewriters were waiting along the farthest wall, buried under dust and the operator's manual for some vanished dishwasher. Chester caught a whiff of unwashed flesh, a thousand uncharitable thoughts coming to mind. He had typing paper in his back pocket. Unfolding it, he realized that his hands were shaking. With a matching tremor in his voice, he said, "Just want to see how they work."

Could a shrewd predator somehow guess his plan?

The first typewriter, a bluish Smith Corona, had very faded, but very normal *p*s and *k*s.

Chester began to roll the paper into the big gray Adler, but he already knew it wasn't the right one. And why should it be? Even if this was the cannibal, he would have his own typewriter in the house, or it would have been sold ages ago. Except for the recipes, there was no evidence. After a moment of typing, Chester turned to the man, regarding him in the hard glare of the shop lights. Then with the steadiest voice he could manage, he asked, "Have you ever heard of Vengeance Stew?"

For a long moment, the face was puzzled. Then came the slow flash of recognition, or maybe something else. Whatever it was, the man muttered in a low, distinctly angry voice, "What do you mean, vengeance?"

Chester opened his mouth, his voice stolen.

"Just what the hell do you want here?"

Good Lord, what if this was the cannibal...?

"You don't give a shit about typewriters." The man walked to the flatbed and pulled the tarp down over the newish engine. "Because I've got a bill a sale. If you think there's something wrong here...!"

"Something's very wrong here," said Chester, feeling it in his bones.

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"Oh, yeah?" Now the man came at him. "Like what, you old shit?"

It had been forty years since Chester's last fistfight, but panic gave him the old instincts. Unfortunately, his reflexes were missing. His first swing was diverted. His second swing did nothing but throw him off-balance, and his opponent gave him a quick smack in the belly, putting him down on his knees, down on the very hard, very cold concrete.

"It's not your engine," Chester heard, the voice falling from a great height. "And I got a bill a sale to prove it!"

Why was he talking about engines?

Looking up, Chester saw an ugly, angry face floating over him. An enormous fist drifted past as the voice asked him, "What do you mean, vengeance? Tell me, or I'll kick the shit out of you!"

"The stew," Chester muttered. "I just want to know...what's in it...!"

"Stew? What the fuck do I know about stew?"

Chester tried to stand, and the fist drove him down again.

"First tell me why you came here. Who told you about my business?" But as the man lifted his fist, he seemed to lose both strength and will. The amoral eyes became unfocused. The fight was visibly leaking out of him.

Another voice fell from an ever higher place.

A familiar voice, it said with ease and purpose, "I know a recipe. Rectums and testicles in a sweet plum sauce."

There was a long, long pause. Then Evelyn said, "If you hurt him, I'll cut your balls off. Do you understand?"

The knife was resting between the man's legs. Judging by the long blade, it had spent years moving from garage sale to garage sale, rusting and dulling along the way, but never losing its capacity to menace.

"I know how to use knives," she told the man, working the blade even closer. "I can butcher you in two minutes. Believe me."

Both men nodded, taking her at her word.

Absolutely.

There were an astonishing number of questions that Chester didn't ask in the next hour. Evelyn drove, and he just sat, mute and exhausted, struggling to come to terms with a revelation that he couldn't have predicted and with which he could never, ever come to terms.

It was Evelyn who finally spoke. Quietly, but with determination and

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a certain chilliness, she told him, "When we married, we promised not to ask about our pasts. It was your idea, as I remember. You said that we'd probably done things that we regretted, bad things that were childish and maybe even unforgivable. And I don't know what secrets you have, but if you think about it, very carefully, you'll see that you still don't know anything about my secrets, either. Nothing substantial. Just guesses pulled out of a damned box that I honestly thought was lost. Lost, and gone." A pause. "Some stupid little box full of words on paper. Nothing else. Someone else's words, but you don't need to know whose. Do you hear me? Are you listening? For God sake, say something to me, Chester...!"

"Like what?" he whispered, nothing audible over the rumble of their truck's old engine.

Evelyn was crying. A woman of rare emotions, she made quite a sight, driving with both hands on the wheel and her face wet and her voice struggling to remain in control. "When, when, when have I ever disappointed you? Ever? Just point and say, 'Here you were a bad wife. You were an awful person. On such-and-such occasion, you showed me an evil side.'"

He couldn't point to a day, or even a moment, when anything resembling evil had emerged from his wife.

With a jerk of the wheel, she pulled onto the shoulder, put the truck into neutral, then said, "You drive. I'll walk around and give you time...and if you want, just drive on..."

He said nothing, watching her open her door and step down.

Watching her slam the door shut.

Chester scooted in behind the wheel, pushing in the clutch and placing his right hand on the gear shift. Then he waited, watching her in one mirror, then the other, studying her as she slowed, then stopped, obviously giving him every chance to leave her.

He put it in gear, and he drove.

Backing up eight feet, he opened the passenger door and said, "Come on. There's an auction starting at noon. If we speed, we can just about make it."

She stood in the sun, giving him a wary look.

"What kind of auction?" she asked.

"You never know," Chester replied. Then after a minute, with a grim resolve, "That's the fun in them."

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Alex Irvine's previous stories for us include the dark fantasy "Rosetti Song" and the near-future sf story "Intimations of Immortality." His latest story is a very different proposition entirely. Mr. Irvine reports that his first novel, A Scattering of Jades, *is due to be published next year and he is busily working on a variety of projects, both academic and literary.*

Akhenaten

By Alex Irvine

SHE FOUND HIM HALF-sunken in the Nile marshes, tangled in reeds and rushes like a shipwrecked sailor amid the wrack of his raft. Or, she would later think, as if the great river itself had birthed him from its banks, and whenever she had that thought as an old woman she would shiver and glance up expecting to see the hands of the sun reaching out for her. The sun: he claimed the sun for his own, he claimed all Egypt for the sun. When her bearers wiped the black mud from his face, there on the banks of the Nile before the city of Thebes, the sun blazed from his eyes. Blinded, she ordered him taken to the palace, hidden in the harem of her husband Amenhotep Nebmaetre, bathed and fed and hidden from the sun.

When next she saw him, he looked only as a slave might: spindly of arm and leg, shrunken of chest, his belly protuberant like a hungry child's. But he was not a child. Neither, perhaps, was he a man. His face tapered from high cheekbones to a jaw like an arrowhead; no hair grew on his chin, and his skull lay oblong on the silk cushion in her private chamber. His eyes opened, and she caught her breath.

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With a gesture, she dismissed her Hebrew chambermaid Miryam, who left breathing prayers to that tribe's pagan gods. "I am Tiye," she said after a moment. "God-wife to the Pharaoh who is the third to bear the name Amenhotep."

He whispered in reply, and she bent close to hear his words. "Again," she commanded, and again he spoke, but she did not understand his words. Only then, with the strange sounds of his language in her ears, feeling as if from a distance her own lips haltingly repeat those opaque syllables, did she ask herself why she had brought him up from the marsh. One deception was rarely enough. How many was she prepared to undertake?

Amenhotep knew nothing of the stranger until his son Thutmose died and the question of succession was thrown open to debate. Viziers and eunuchs furrowed their brows; fishermen and scribes found themselves flinching at the passage of clouds across the face of the sun. Amenhotep himself worried, and spoke long to Tiye. Was the second son, Amenhotep IV, fit to bear the double crown of the Kingdom of the Nile? Tiye had no answer, and then that question too was swept away when Amenhotep the son followed his older brother through the gates of Anubis.

On the night of her second son's death, Tiye stood vigil with her husband. Egypt slept on the banks of the Nile, unaware that its future, docile as a kitten six days before, now crouched to pounce.

She found herself speaking before she had entirely decided what to say. "They must not know," she said. "The succession must not be questioned. How many of your generals, how many priests of Amen, are even now imagining their own accessions? A second death...."

Amenhotep nodded, his many chins rippling. He leaned heavily on a staff as he settled his bulk onto a raised platform of cushions. In him Tiye saw the cares of kingship, saw the way he had gorged his body as if the spread of his girth might set an example for the borders of his nation. He wheezed heavily as he sat, and for a moment could not get his breath to speak.

"They must not know," he agreed, "but they will. What are we to tell them?"

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Tiye pitied him in that instant. His heir dead, dead too his second son who was not fit to follow him. Aging, obese, without male issue, knowing that the greater part of his days were surely behind him.

And sadder yet, she thought, because he knew that neither of his sons could have borne up under the weight of his legacy.

"There is a man," she said. Silence fell and she became aware again that her second son lay dead in the room with her, near enough to touch. She waited.

Amenhotep gazed long at the body of his second son. In his eyes Tiye saw the sickness of mortality, his and his sons', like a creeping Nile fog — or the crocodile that hid within. After a long silence of moonlight creeping across the stones of the floor, he spoke. "Would you have a co-regent, then? What sort of a man?"

"No," Tiye said in answer to his first question. Then her mind began to stumble over the many things she wanted to say about the stranger sequestered in the harem. The stranger who had learned to speak the language of Egypt, who had become first her confidant, then her lover and now, if she had her last desire....

Who had spoken to her of Aten, of the sun. Who had spoken of the distance between stars, and the sources of life. Yes, Aten, she had said. Pharaoh worships Aten, and the people worship Aten in him. She had in mind a wall of the palace, carved with rays of the sun that ended in human hands bringing gifts to Pharaoh her husband and to the people of Egypt. The gods created the sun to give us life.

The stranger had shaken his head, his marvelous, elongated, shining head. You misunderstand, he said. Men of Egypt, he said, fed on the grain of the fields, and the grain fed where? Fish of the river fed on smaller fish, and those smaller fish on smaller still, until the smallest fed on what but the plants of marsh and bank, and those plants fed where? The wind, he said, like the man and woman of Egypt, rises in the morning and falls at evening — what does it follow?

She had gone to her brother Aanen, the high priest of Ra, and said to him, There is a man who asks questions I cannot answer. What would you have me say to him? Aanen asked, and his eyes widened as she whispered in his ear. Aanen left his vestments and put on simple linens, and she smuggled him past the eunuchs into the harem. To his credit, he betrayed

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no fear at meeting the stranger, did not even wait for introductions, but immediately began. You have spoken of suns and stars, he said, and fish and rivers and men. What of the gods?

Tiye had found herself suddenly mindful of the Hebrew maid with her brawling pantheon, and as if reading her mind the stranger had said, *From whence comes the light that you may carve these other gods*?

Aanen nodded and understood. He turned to her, his eyes bright as if the stranger's gaze had left sunlight there. He spoke, and in his words Tiye could hear the scorching heat of revelation.

She had begun to believe the stranger then, and to carry the priest her brother's words inside her like faith. And she believed him now, in this chamber with her dead son and dying husband, and her belief lent a quiet strength to her voice as she freed her brother's words once more.

"He has come from the Sun."

And thus it was that Amenhotep's second son did not die, but came forth from the palace at Thebes the next morning. If the viziers and eunuchs whispered, the keenness of Pharaoh's ears kept them from doing more. Amenhotep IV lived, and would succeed his father.

HE STOOD SOMETIMES, during that last year of his father's life, watching the sun set in the hills west of the great river, and then he stood watching the stars wheel across the sky. Tiye came to him, always, unable to help herself, and always he softly wished for solitude, and always she went away with her heart strangely broken and uplifted by the starlight caught in the depths of his eyes. It seemed to her at these times that he spoke in his old language, the language of the starving nameless man washed up on the banks of a river that had no beginning. And it seemed as well that she understood, and that in the silhouette of his head blocking the stars was written knowledge of things whose names she lacked the words to ask.

This and more she remembered, when during solitary nights of her own Tiye would chew over the errors of her life.

Amenhotep IV rose to power amid whispers. The sounds of the wind in stone, river in sand, leaf against stem, all began to sound tones of

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apprehension. The artists came to sculpt him, and showed him their heroic studies. "Destroy those," he said, and rose to his feet. With a flourish he swept his cloak off and unfastened his tunic. Naked he stood on his throne, and even the palace cats stopped in their tracks and averted their eyes. "The sun is as the sun is," he said, "and the body is as the body. The skies are full of suns and the worlds full of bodies." Amenhotep IV flung away his garments and raised his spindly arms to the shaft of sunlight that fell through the topmost window in his chamber.

"See me as I am," he commanded. "Carve what you see."

He turned then, and looked out the window into the square. "Bring me the most beautiful woman within sight of this window," he ordered, "except the ones in the shade. The most beautiful woman in sight of this window will be my wife in sight of the sun."

The sculptors ran from him, and the architects of the new monuments at Karnak looked at each other. What madness was this, to marry as monkeys might?

"Aten looks down," Amenhotep breathed as his soldiers spread through the plaza. "Aten sees, Aten gives. From Aten we have come."

Her name, when she came through the door dressed in simple linen, was Nefertiti. She was thin like him, and next to her he looked even more girlish than his advisers had thought. He caught her gaze and held it. "Aten has chosen well," he said, and the soldiers looked elsewhere as the greed in his eyes rose in his body. "Leave us," he said, and Nefertiti became his wife.

This much Tiye saw, but it wasn't until she heard the Hebrew maid gossiping that she heard of Nefertiti's naming. Neferneferuaten, Tiye thought. Is everything to be for Aten now? Shall we no longer remember the gods of our fathers, Isis and Anubis and Osiris and Amen-Ra who...

Who shines in the sun, she had been about to think. What was the truth now? Was Aten something outside the sun, something that used the sun as a means to spread his power to the Earth? This is what Amenhotep IV said, and when she asked him, but what did it mean? Either a god was, or wasn't. What did it mean to say a god used the sun or the river, if it didn't mean that the sun or the river were the god? But Amenhotep IV said this was not so. "Look into the sky," he said, when Tiye found him out on the balcony at night. "How many stars are there?"

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The astronomers said there were one hundred thousand, so that was what she said to him.

"Meaningless number," he said. "I have counted them. I have good eyes, and I can only count three thousand."

Tiye tried to imagine counting the stars. No, she tried to imagine not losing count. Counting was easy, if one could begin over and over again. But to move one's eyes across the sky, weaving every star into the fabric of memory and giving each its own number...this was impossible.

"Three thousand?" she said. "Is that all there are?"

"No. There are thousands of thousands of thousands. Some of them I have seen and you never will. Others neither of us will ever know except in the telling." He turned to her, ran a long finger down from the point of her chin to the hollow between her collarbones. "Tiye, you have been all that stood between me and the loneliness of the mad. Now I have taken a wife; will you not reprove me?"

"Pharaoh must take a wife," Tiye said. She was certain that his finger had left a blazing trace down her throat, and wondered before she mastered her silliness why she could not see its glow in the sloping hollows of his face. "A young woman will give you children, and a man with children need never worry about loneliness."

"A man with children," Amenhotep IV whispered. She tried to speak to him again, but he seemed not to hear.

HE MOVED the capital upriver a year later. The priesthood of Ra pressured him not to, and he threw them from his chamber, screaming after them that Pharaoh would move very Egypt if he chose. Did not the Sun move? And was not Pharaoh the Sun of his people?

The next morning he arose and came out of his chamber bearing papyrus scrawled with strange symbols. Nefertiti followed, her eyes strange as the shadow of current cast on the bottom of a pool. Her first daughter squirmed in her arms, a lively child with her father's elongated head and her father's habit of looking at the stars. Thebes was sick with the infestation of Amen and Mut, he declared to the early-morning servants sweeping the throne hall. He had been sickened by proximity. He sent them to gather the important figures attached to the court. When

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they arrived, heavy-eyed with sleep, Pharaoh gave them these words: "Amenhotep is dead."

They brought Tiye, and he said to her, "I am no longer named for the man who came before me, but for the god who comes before us all. I am the god walking on Earth, I am He Who Is For Aten. I am Akhenaten."

Late that night, Tiye awakened with the aches of age. Stiffly she walked to him, mouth leaping with a question that had plagued her dreams for years before surfacing just this night. The way a dead man returns from the river, bringing with him the tales of his sojourn in the weedy depths of the dead, she brought Akhenaten the question of her dream and put it to him under the moonless sky.

"I found you in the reeds," she said. "Where did you come from?"

"Not so very far away," he answered, and it was no answer.

"Where?"

"When I was a boy," Akhenaten said, "I learned the stories of Egypt. I used to look across the waters of the sea and think, Egypt is there. Someday I will travel there."

Assyria? she wanted to know, and then, Canaan? Persia?

None of those, he said, but nearest Canaan. She thought about travelers' tales of Canaan, of its fine rivers and sweet olives. "Is it not on the ocean?"

"Yes," he said. "When I was a boy, we lived on the ocean, and the world was the blue of water and the white of stone. Now I see the black of night and what color are the stars?"

For a while Tiye had nothing to say. Then she asked him the question behind the question. "When I found you, were you fleeing the place you were born?"

"No."

"Why, then, do you wish to move upriver, away from the ocean?"

"Because," he said, "I want to travel through time."

Tiye had words to answer this. "All men and women travel through time," she said. "There is no other road."

"I want to travel back up that road." Akhenaten pointed at a gleaming streak on the river, where the reflection of a single star elongated into a shimmering ribbon on the water. "See; the river flows only one way until it reaches the sea. Time flows only one way as well, and no man knows what sea it fills. But there is a way to go against the current."

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"Against the current to what?" she asked. "To yesterday? You are Pharaoh. Egypt cannot look always toward yesterday. I learned this the day you broke the sculptors' studies."

"All men can spend their lives looking toward yesterday," Akhenaten said.

They regarded the river in silence. Tiye knew she should withdraw, but she was old enough that Pharaoh's annoyance no longer frightened her, and she was still sleepless with the complaints of her body. "You said once that Aten is the light by which we can know the other gods. I heard you say this, and saw my brother Aanen. Did you look at his face as he began to believe? I think I would not want to see a face like that very often." Aanen had become militant in his priesthood of the new Aten, destroying temples to other gods. Three times he had killed a priest of Amun, and once a priest of Ra. His acolytes had begun hacking images of the other gods out of temples and stelae.

"Aanen believes in belief," Akhenaten said. "I believe in the search for it."

"Which of you believes in the gods?" Tiye said, and he had no answer.

"I have taken my name for Aten."

Tiye nodded. "And yet you spend your nights looking at the sky when he is not present to caress you with his rays. You worship the sun, but all your life you watch the stars."

"Every star is a sun," Akhenaten said.

"Is every star Aten?" she challenged him.

He chuckled then, a sound like the scraping of scarabs on stone. "Must old women blaspheme?" he wondered. "When men no longer come to your bed, must you throw your scorn at the gods?"

"Is every star Aten?" she asked again, with a rushing in her head that battered against her mind like a flood. Beginning to understand. Her eyes came back into focus and she saw him looking at her. Starlight streaked his eyes as it had the eternal surface of the river.

"You see," he said. "I do not know if every star is Aten, but I do know that he comes to me through the sun. If other eyes look up at other suns, Aten looks down at them as well."

Tiye thought of that night many years later, when while looking for her Hebrew maid she turned a corner and ran hard into another Hebrew,

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a young man. He looked at her and for a moment she felt as if she must be in two places at once, as if she had been overlaid onto herself. The stone corridor fell away and she smelled the salt marshes near the mouth of the Nile, saw the contorted body of the young man who lay in the mud looking up at her. This young Hebrew had the eyes of a fanatic, a gaze touched with knowledge of the infinite. A gaze like the one the man who would become Akhenaten had fixed upon Tiye, so many years ago.

"Who are you?" she asked, at once quavering and imperious.

He held her gaze as he walked around her at a respectful distance, but he did not answer her question, and when he walked away she did not follow.

Tiye found her maid Miryam in the washing room. "Who was that who was here just now?" she demanded.

Miryam ducked her head. "Please," she said. "I cannot tell."

Tiye slapped her hard on the ear. "It is that Moses, is it not? Who stirs up the Hebrews? He believes, does he not?"

"We all believe," Miryam said, crying only a little.

Tiye thought for a moment. A Hebrew named Moses was, incredibly, preaching Aten against the Egyptians. One of the priests said he was Miryam's younger brother; others said he had been born to Levite slaves. Akhenaten paid no attention. As long as Aten's name rang in the streets of his cities, Pharaoh paid little heed to what was said. Tiye softened. She had been harsh out of discomfiture from her encounter in the hall and the memories it provoked.

"You mustn't fear me," Tiye said, although fear was part of what she wanted. "I know how your tribe believes. It isn't so different from how we believed before Akhenaten. When I was a girl, every household had the gods it preferred. But now some of you are uncertain, aren't you? And some of you have become like this man Moses. He has found Aten."

Miryam touched the corner of her eye and flicked the tear away. "He has gone farther than that. He says now that even to name the god is to blaspheme. He says that if Aten is supposed to be a thing beyond the sun, an idea only, then how can it be named? This is foolishness. He says that Egypt is headed for the same doom that awaits all of the other peoples who know not the truth of the invisible god, the He Whose Name Must Not Be Spoken. He says that naming god Aten is like naming a man Worm."

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"Where has he gone?"

"I beg you, Mother," Miryam said, tears springing once again from her eyes. "Let him speak his mind. Egypt is huge and Hebrews are so few. He hurts nothing."

"Pharaoh will judge," Tiye said, and Miryam slipped away down the corridor.

Tiye stood in the washing room, thinking. Perhaps she should have all of the Hebrews out of the palace, out of the harem. They were too quick to anger, too eager to seize on new ideas. What Egypt needed now was stability, and nothing could be stable as long as the royal household simmered with dissent and wild heresy.

But the look in the young Hebrew's eyes. She had seen that look in Akhenaten's eyes, so very long ago by the marshy banks of the Nile.

In the next year Akhenaten's daughters began to die. One after the other, as each of them approached the age at which she might have expected them to bleed for the first time, they began to complain of headaches. Strange fits followed, marked by a turning inward of the limbs as if the girls wished to swim back up the river of time until they found their mother's womb again. Then, just like fish that stop gasping bit by bit, they died.

Nefertiti bore sorrow as quietly as she had borne the children. Still her beauty stole the gazes of men, but it was the beauty now of sunset rather than sunrise. Still her voice charmed Pharaoh, but her spell was a shared dream of the past.

Akhenaten held each of his daughters as she gave up her body, stroking the beautiful long head and crying out in the language he still spoke in his sleep. As his children died, something in him broke. He paid less attention to Egypt, worried less about border incursions and trade difficulties, ignored completely the building program at his city Akhetaten. Even his tomb stood unfinished, its workmen idled to play dice outside the sculptor Thutmose's workshop. Only his nights remained constant. Shunning Nefertiti's bed, he stood watching the stars from sunset until dawn, weeping to himself in his strange cold language that to Tiye seemed like the language a river would speak if it wished to be heard by men. She took it upon herself to approach him one night, walking slowly on knees that ground like mortar and pestle, touching the walls when her failing

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eyes lost the way. When she took her place next to him and looked up to see what he saw, she realized that all but the brightest stars now hid from her.

"I believed," he said softly, "that I would live in them."

Tiye touched his shoulder. "You yet might in two of them."

"I have no great faith," he said. In the darkness, she thought a corner of his mouth tensed in what might have been a smile. He turned to look at her. "You said once that a man with children would never know loneliness. But here I am. My daughters die, and I am lonely."

"Sorrow and loneliness are not the same thing," Tiye said.

"I tell you I am lonely. I knew children might die, but you were right. I believed that seeing myself in them, seeing them in myself, I could forget that once I came alone from the sun." He kept silent for some time then, and when he spoke again his voice was twisted. "Instead I killed them."

"Every father kills his child," Tiye said. "To have a child is to set it on the road of time."

"I killed my daughters," Akhenaten said again. "They were beautiful, and they loved me, and I killed them by giving them life." Something lit up within him then, and he straightened. The old language and the new spilled together from his mouth until with great finality he said, "The next generation. Yes." With that he left the terrace in great purposeful strides.

Tiye followed him, fearing the worst, and by the time he had reached the bedchambers she knew what he intended. "You must not," she begged, holding onto his arm with all of her old woman's strength. "They have not yet bled."

He threw her away as if shrugging off a robe and she fell to the stone floor. Her knees made twin sharp cracks and pain flooded from them. Tiye tried to stand, but her legs would not bear her. "Pharaoh!" she cried.

Strong hands bore her to her feet. "Hush now, mother," Nefertiti said softly into her ear. The quiet strength of the queen's voice checked Tiye's struggles, and seemed even to still her pain. Nefertiti led her to the queen's bed and laid her there until the pain in her knees began to subside.

"How do you bear it?" Tiye said. "Is this not the first time?" She recalled his face, flashing suddenly with revelation, and thought, *Surely it is. Surely he has not done this before.*

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"First time for these girls, yes," Nefertiti said. "Not for the others."

Egypt, Tiye thought. Turning inward, losing interest in the world just as its Pharaoh was turning inward, defiling his own family. Because of me, she thought. I raised him up from the mud and reeds, and now Egypt will fall with him. A desire to confess surged in her, reached as far as her mouth and stopped there, at her old woman's thin lips that would not pass the truth of her betrayal.

"He believes it will save them," Nefertiti said. "He believes that they were poisoned by his seed when it made them, and that they can only be saved by receiving it again. At other times he says that their children will live, and it is true. Tutankhaten is healthy."

This secret of Pharaoh's only son stopped Tiye's mouth more tightly. Tutankhaten, King's Bodily Son, begotten upon one of his sisters? It was a story one might have told about the old gods. It had no place in the modern Egypt of Aten.

The dam in Tiye's mouth broke. "What is he?"

"A man," came the reply, hushed almost to a whisper. "Only a man. But he says he has gone too far up the river, and looks different than those around him. He never explains." Nefertiti caught Tiye's chin, guided it around until they were facing. "Do you know what this means?"

"He said to me once that rivers only flow one way," Tiye said, and might have said more, but Akhenaten returned then, slick with sweat and his eyes alight. He brushed past Tiye and caught Nefertiti in his arms, burying his face in the swanlike curves of her neck. "I will save them," he said, and said it again, and said it again. Tiye got stiffly to her feet and left without a word.

Akhenaten's daughters, with their strange heads and their strange deaths, hung over Egypt like a plague of the mind. Tiye watched herself grow older, watched Akhenaten too begin to hunch and walk slowly. More and more rarely she met him on the terraces late at night.

The last time, she shuffled slowly along the route she had long since learned by touch of fingertip and echo of breath. She found him leaning against a statue of himself, and she imagined sculpture and subject training their gazes over Egypt and what lay beyond. "Once," she said, "you told me that every star is a sun."

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She felt him nod.

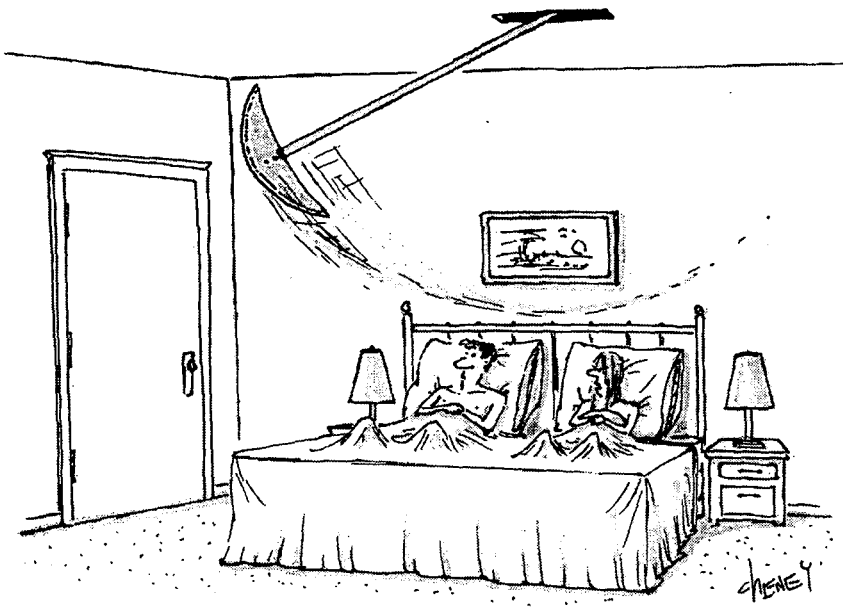
"Which one is your home?"

He laughed softly, and his breath wheezed in his throat. "Aten is my home," he said.

Tiye jabbed him with a horny fingernail. "Which?"

"This one," Akhenaten said. "All the stars are the same star, and all the rivers are the same river, and all the directions are the same direction. But none of them lead home."

She was thinking about that the next year, a year in which Moses Miryam's brother killed a man and fled east to Midian, the year in which she died in Akhetaten with her Pharaoh, who had been her lover, who had once staggered her with a gaze that spoke of infinity. ☙



"No, it's your *turn to be on top!"*

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Michael Cadnum is the author of several suspense and horror novels, including St. Peter's Wolf, Skyscape, *and* Nightlight. *He is also an acclaimed poet and the author of numerous Young Adult novels, the most recent of which,* The Book of the Lion, *was a finalist for the National Book Award. The sequel, entitled* The Raven of the Waves, *will be out shortly. Here he presents us with a very devious fantasy.*

Elf Trap

By Michael Cadnum

IT STARTED WITH RATS. Out on the bird feeder. Graceful, leaping, acrobatic rodents, fawn-colored. Each rat performed a standing high jump from the pea gravel to the wild-bird feeder Norman had hung from the nectarine tree. The rats bulldozed the doves right off the feeder platform early each morning, and hunkered down to get fat on millet seed.

The jays put up a fight, yelling in bird language at the rats, but even a jay clears out when a rat air-mails itself right into the middle of bird heaven, the feeder swinging back and forth.

At first I thought my eyes were mistaken, because my peepers aren't what they used to be. I take my sewing out in the early sun. I listen to the finches chirp and sing, working on my quilts which until recently brought me no public acclaim, but which were attractive combinations of calicos and ginghams and made-in-U.S.A. all-cotton fabrics you'll see on a calendar or my how-to book about quilting one of these days. I do my favorite sort of cooking in the morning, pig's feet and pork-leavings, the stuff butchers throw away. I make a tasty stew, and simmer it for hours while I sew.

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"Rats!" I cried when I finally realized that the graceful, ravenous creatures were not some new bird life. "Norman, we've got rats bad!" My life has not been easy, my aching back requiring aspirin every night.

"I'll take care of them, Tina," he said.

Norman rescued cats from trees. He helped kids cross the street, holding up traffic. He looked after neighbors' gardens when they were on vacation. Everybody loved him. Norman was the one who would direct traffic every time the signal at Sixth and Cornell went out, which was often because of the brown-outs.

The driving public loved him, and then when he did one of his Voices, the ones from the Disney series, drivers would ask him to sign an inflatable Wise Elf for the kids, or a Wise Elf action figure from Jack-in-the-Box, which was hard because there was no real writing surface on the Wise Elf except across the face. Norman was the Elf-man in the eyes of the public, famous for creating the beloved elder elf for the movie, and the direct-to-video series, and then the CDs. Every time Hollywood needed an elf sound-alike it was Norman's voice, until he got the polyp.

"I saved the day!" he would say, marching back to the house, accompanied by an Emeryville cop, congratulating him for being, once again, such a big help to the municipality. Norman would give the rookie man-in-blue a gnome, one of the concrete dwarves people put on lawns.

Or Norman would give a guest a big plastic Christmas elf that lit up if you popped a forty-watt all-weather bulb into the appropriate hole. Or a water nymph riding a dolphin, if his guest was highbrow, the dolphin being one of those half-fish, half-toad gargoyles the Renaissance artist favored instead of more naturalistic-looking water mammals. It was the nymph that mattered.

Norman was crazy about gremlins, dryads, pixies. He had cufflinks designed in Santa Fe, an elf's head, winking. That is, it was supposed to be a wink. The drawings looked like the elf-face copyrighted by the Disney Corporation, and borrowed by Norman who had, after all, made the Wise Elf a household name.

The cufflinks, though, looked like gold-plated chewing gum, the sort you stick on the underside of theater seats, but it was the thought that counted. Elf neckties, elf-monogrammed hankies, Wise Elf stationery, elf

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playing cards, elf-embossed Christmas greetings. Norman figured the elf was his totem, and he was the elf's best friend on Earth.

The trouble was that Norman actually believed in elves, and thought that when he got a check from his agent more or less on time it was the elves who had nudged the hairpiece-wearing saprophyte into taking the cap off his Montblanc.

Every time Norman remembered to take his umbrella out of a taxi or avoided stepping in some dog poop at the marina he'd boom, "Thank you, elves!" in a way that if you didn't know him sounded cute. Norman believed the elves kept his roses from getting mildew, and kept white fly off his Kentucky blue wonders.

He thought elves scurried around at night and tinkered with his pills. When the polyp shrank and didn't have to be surgically zapped, he believed it was because of elf effort. The surgeon said he'd never seen anything like it. Norman said, "It's the elves at work again." The surgeon chuckled, because who wouldn't, looking at a distinguished, robust, weathered but handsome man like Norman.

But Norman wasn't kidding. Every night he put out tiny brandy snifters he bought at a store that sold playhouse furnishings, four-star brandy, the best available, and when the liquor was partly evaporated the next morning he'd nod to me, and say, "What did I tell you?"

So when the rats came in battalions, more every morning, gymnastic, scrambling circus rats, Norman frowned and said, "The elves'll lend a hand in this, Tina," like all we had to do was wait for the little guys to work up a military levy and march on the rats with drawn hat pins.

I suggested rat poison, and Norman said it made the animals suffer. I suggested a rat trap and he said maybe.

I had a plan that would cure Norman of elves, if I got up the nerve.

EVERYONE REMEMBERS the rat summer.

Rats owned the gardens, they owned the cellars, they danced in the Dumpsters, they boogied down the fire escapes, they drove busses, they ran for public office. Very nearly. That was the summer that the rat was king, and desperate measures were required to eliminate a pest some said were our native California wood rat, denizen of hill and salt marsh, and not the chunky,

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bristly Norway rat at all. It made no difference to me. I nagged. I left Post-its on the fridge. No bird sang.

Norman bought a trap. A rat trap is exactly like a mouse trap, but bigger, cheap pine, with that wicked metal contraption, a spring and a hook. Norman baited it with a smudge of bacon fat, just as the man at the hardware store had suggested. I was pleased at Norman's efforts, but then I heard him talking out in the garden.

He was walking around the landscaping, talking to the lantana and the cherry tomato plants, saying, "Be careful of the trap — it's for rats." Norman stayed out there a long time, talking to the wood pile, talking to the bonsai maple, talking to every cranny in the garden, and even though I didn't have to ask, I did.

He said, "I'm warning the elves," like I was stupid to ask. People used to tell me I was lucky to be around such an elf-loving guy.

I told myself this was all the more reason to carry out my plan that very night.

The next morning neither one of us wanted to look. We don't like discovering dead things, even rats. We stalled, loading the dishwasher, listening to the short-wave, the local news from around the world, but at last Norman tiptoed out. He was gone a long time.

When he came back, he was ashen.

He couldn't say a word. "We got one," he said at last.

I said, "Terrific!" Although I myself was somewhat pale and shaken, I wasn't exactly surprised.

"No!" he said. "Tina, we got an elf!"

Sure enough, a crumpled body in a cute yellow jerkin and pointed shoes was half squashed under the business part of the trap. Worker ants were already dancing on the apparent corpse.

It was an elf-like cadaver, what you could make of it, although it didn't look like much, and Norman couldn't stand to do much of a post mortem. We buried the tiny interloper out by the ornamental lemon tree.

Norman's collapse is well-known the world over.

How Disney security wouldn't let him on the lot in Burbank claiming they found some old memos of Norman's showing the famous late Mr.

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Walt D doing awful and awkward things to cartoon forest creatures. That would have passed over, but then one day when Norman was directing traffic he dragged a motorist from his Toyota for not coming to an immediate and complete stop.

Public opinion turned in a moment, and slogans were sprayed and banners were hung every night, accusing Norman of being a bully. Norman put out his little snifters, and every morning the rats had knocked over some, and left the others untouched.

Norman took to asking my opinion about things, which was a first — should we move to Ensenada, should he write an apology to the world. When my all-long-staple cotton quilt was selected by San Francisco's De Young Museum for inclusion in its Celebrate America jamboree, I was surprised and touched to hear Norman say, "I'm glad the elves remember one of us."

Things are much better now that Norman has almost totally stopped doing Wise Elf in the shower every morning, and stopped waiting for the phone to ring. I tell him to trim the star jasmine and put a redwood tree baby in the terra cotta planter, and he does. I tell him to let the traffic pile up in the intersection, and he lets it. I give mail-order sewing lessons. I endorse a brand of thread.

This morning I had a wee fire in the fireplace, burning tiny paper sewing patterns for a little jerkin and tiny shoes. And I burned up plans I had drawn, how to make a pig's ear into another shape entirely. I remember vividly how I never really made the thing — I cut the cloth, and got the needle and thread out on the kitchen sink, but my nerve failed.

It wasn't me. Some other hands did the work.

I came out that midnight for my aspirin and discovered a fake little dead man, all dressed up and ready for the trap. I put him out there in the trap with these two hands, telling myself I didn't hear the little footsteps and the tiny laughter.

I'm starting to believe it. I used to be the worst skeptic in the world, but not anymore.

For example, the bad thing that happened to Norman just last night, I didn't do that, either. The police came, and then the reporters gathered out by the curb, taking pictures of the house, with poor Norman in the hospital.

I couldn't be more upset that someone took a little needle and fine, silk thread, and stitched Norman's mouth shut.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

PASCAL'S TERROR

The silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me.

—Blaise Pascal, 1623-1662

WITH THIS memorable sentence, a thoughtful, religious Frenchman saw that the problem of infinity unlocked by modern science was basic. It remains so today.

Most awful of the perspectives opening to the seventeenth-century mind was the stillness of the yawning heavens, their moral blankness. There was no music of the spheres.

Blaise Pascal was a Catholic who confronted his own doubts by thinking in terms of the shadow modern science cast over the ebbing theological intellectual landscape of his era. He saw science as a new door to knowledge, one that had to be reconciled with the ancient path of religion.

To Pascal, a man in love with the absolute — whether in his deft calculus of probabilities or in his acute theology — that refusal of the universe to tip its hand, to lend purpose to human action, was terrifying. Though Aristotle had said, "Either an outright denial or an outright acknowledgment of the being of the infinite leads to many impossibilities," the ancient world had not earnestly grappled with the implications.

Not that the modern view is comforting, of course. Consider that as you walk along, your step taking you forward maybe a meter, the Earth's spin carries you a thousand times farther to the east. The Earth's slow circle about its sun bears you westward even more: sixty kilometers.

But the sun is no fixed point, either. It wanders among the nearby stars, who are in a similar random rush, so while you make one step

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your local Sun Express takes you thirty kilometers off toward the star Vega. The sun's grave gyre about the hub of our galaxy is faster, so the pinwheel swirl of the spiral brings you another five hundred kilometers along a course that will not repeat for 250 million years.

And even our beloved Milky Way is not a reliable, fixed mass. It carries you along another thousand miles or so, as it arcs around its nearby galaxies, and with respect to even more distant but powerful masses.

All is ferment. Perhaps, thinking of it makes getting around harder. Or maybe it seems easier, when you consider how much is being done for you, without your ever knowing.

And all this transpires in utter quiet.

Pascal had to struggle with a genuinely infinite real universe, and not merely the mathematical infinities of Greek mathematics. Worse, he had to confront an infinite, silent Creation, one he believed was made by a God who later sent delegates and texts to help us.

The two aspects of Pascal's terror are somewhat separable. I'll discuss immensity first, and silence next month.

Astronomy had thrown open the vast window available through the telescope, and it could not be shut again. Distances beyond human ken seemed to rob our lives of purpose. On so vast a stage, who could plausibly believe that we stood at stage center?

This fear is very old. Rudy Rucker describes it and much else in his enjoyable *Infinity and the Mind*, the standard work for nonmathematicians on the many species of infinity. As he notes, the Greek word for infinity is *apeiron*, meaning unbounded, but also undefined, indefinite. This links immensity with chaos in Greek thinking. The word applies to crumpled newspaper, crooked lines, the arbitrarily complex. Aristotle felt that "...being infinite is a privation, not a perfection and the absence of a limit."

Reflect that the *Odyssey* follows a man who moves back and forth between civilized places and the rim of the unknown, confronting monsters and strange places, then returning. Odysseus proves his abilities by controlling his emotions (and employing a linguistic trick to elude the Cyclops, plainly a civilized art). One can read this founding document of western civilization as a science fictional voyage of discovery, both of lands and

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of the nature of a truly civilized personality. But nowhere does he venture into chaos, not even when he visits Hell. There is always a system, an orderly universe.

One wonders what the prospect of the night sky meant to any Greeks who guessed its true size. Or those who entertained the notion that it might go on forever.

The problem hasn't gone away. Infinity of scale still inspires fear and awe and futility.

John Updike keeps wrestling with it, particularly in his overtly theological novels such as *A Month of Sundays*. His *Roger's Version* is expressly about the argument from design, which Hume supposedly disposed of long ago but which keeps cropping up in such newfangled guises as the astrophysicists' Anthropic Principle. (This hotly debated thesis holds that we can "predict" many of the properties of the universe because if matters were different, we — and other intelligent life — wouldn't exist.)

Among mainstream writers, Saul Bellow keeps nibbling at the vacancy of "realistic" life (and literature) beside the universe's yawning gulf. Less intellectual authors ruminate less acutely. Norman Mailer tried to punch it in the jaw, but seldom makes contact unless he slides into fantasy, as in his *Ancient Evenings*.

Some have noticed that you can go the other way, approaching the infinite through the infinitesimal. William Blake's world in a grain of sand reverberates through the miniature worlds of Jorge Luis Borges, often with an air of seeking to purge immensity by retreating into the labyrinthian minute. His most anxious works, though, prefer the denumerably infinite — that is, the prospect of counting forever, meeting infinity by exhaustion. His garden of forking paths reduces the infinities of time to an enclosed area, framing the paradox. His library of Babel opens endlessly and meaninglessly, since it contains all truths and all lies, with no way to tell the difference.

Some of these literary methods of grappling with infinity seem to come from a kind of cultural agoraphobia. In a way this is easy to understand.

Consider the Hilbert Hotel, named for the German mathematician David Hilbert. A customer comes, only to find that, though the hotel is infinitely large, it is filled. So he proposes that the room clerk simply move the person in room 1 to 2, and the occupant of 2 to 3, and so on. Presto! — a new room is

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available. The point is that common sense is useless here. One plus one equals two, but one plus infinity always equals infinity.

The nineteenth-century discoveries in the mathematics of infinity have led to a cool knowledge of analytical properties, but no deeper gut feeling. Physicists subtract away infinities in their calculations, arranging cancellations so that the masses of observed particles come out right — but they don't fathom what's going on any more than Pascal did. (For more on this, consult William Proudstone's engrossing *Labyrinths of Reason*.)

Some authors seem to deny that infinity is interesting, since, finally, it is all the same. Yet this was disproved by Cantor in the nineteenth century, who showed that infinities can have different sizes. The set of irrational numbers, for example, is bigger than the set of whole numbers; they are called transfinite. This mingles with our knowledge that the universe may indeed be infinite.

Italo Calvino's science-fictional works, such as *Cosmicomics*, often reflect a way of joking away the immensities, a common response. In "The Denial of Death" Ernest Becker suggests that humans strike dramatic attitudes when they encounter reminders of "the suction of infinity."

Partly this fear lies in the incomprehensible nature of matters infinite, or as one schoolboy put it, "Infinity is where things happen that don't." Euclidean space lets straight lines meet at infinity, but nobody goes there, so it doesn't matter. Or does it?

People can care powerfully about infinity — vaguely, perhaps, but feelingly. Giordano Bruno, a sixteenth-century cosmologist who announced the infinite plurality of worlds, died at the stake for his troubles. The universe we know today is about a hundred billion light years across, a distance which tumbles into the pit of meaningless numbers.

Science fiction should address this problem more clearly than conventional fiction, which often merely broods about it. In fact, many modern western texts evade the promise of the strangeness and immensity of, for example, other cultures (the infinity of human facets). *The Jewel in the Crown*, to pick a recent novel turned into an upscale TV drama, promises to confront India in its richness, but ends up being about (surprise, surprise) the English class system. Sf may have inherited some of these reflexes.

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After all, how otherwise to account for the pervasive use of faster-than-light travel? (Of course one can cite Aristotle's advice that dramas should use unity of time and place to heighten dramatic power. Nobody wants to hear about the whole voyage, and to the modern attention span, more than a few seconds spent getting to Alpha Centauri is far too much.) Going to the stars now routinely becomes very much like taking the stellar subway; you don't even get to look at the view. Collapsing the true scale of the universe this way robs it of significance and power. This is dealing with infinity by skipping over it, turning away.

Notice that swearing off the faster-than-light drug can have grand effects. Poul Anderson's *Tau Zero* takes a frail crew to speeds razor-close to light speed, employing the relativistic time stretching physics allows. Their payoff, as they lose all contact with humanity, is a vast view of the evolution of a (closed) universe as it swells, pauses, and then squeezes back down into an again-primordial fireball. Refusing to subvert the size of those vast spaces lifts the novel above the myriad dull quickie galactic empires.

The urge to diminish nature's scale runs deep. Two centuries after Pascal, another Frenchman sent an artillery shell to a fictional moon and began in earnest another subverting strategy: filling the infinities with people. Pascal thought of the heavens as forever serene and outside the human realm; Jules Verne made it a subway stop.

Of course, this savvy move made human adventure narratives possible, and all the attendant analogies with the West's frontiers. This persists; Robert Heinlein especially depicts the stars as frontier, raw and waiting to be tamed, rather than as a wilderness immense in mystery — the unknowable, the huge, the nonhuman.

To map is to claim. And once the galaxy was partitioned, weighed, its gravid pulses known, to some extent science itself had domesticated the infinite. The process proceeds eternally, as we now peer back at distant quasars, seeking to see the core fires of the first birthing galaxies. Very few sf narratives confront this grand scale — largely because it is fearsomely hard to populate it plausibly with people, but also, I suspect, because of that persistent terror.

Cosmological measurements of the mass density in the universe imply that the governing geometry of space-time is indeed open, which

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means the universe will continue to evolve to larger scales and flatter local space-time — forever. Unless there is about five times as much mass around as we can detect (which means it must be in the form of either dead black holes or energetic, super-light particles), our prospects are indeed infinite. Our latest measurements clearly predict a universe that accelerates its expansion, driven by some component we do not know — quintessence, some call it. The cosmos seems to rush forward to embrace its eventual infinity.

But at least the universe is filled with something. Emptiness itself signals infinity, too, because each seems the inverse of the other; divide one by infinity and you get zero.

Our defense against that is to either fill it (perhaps with ourselves) or wall it off. This has the quality of making a deal with infinity, allowing it limited expression. (Pascal himself had the impulse to bargain, even with God. His famous wager holds that skeptics might as well believe in God, since there is no loss if He doesn't exist after all.)

Another strategy for avoiding the implications of true infinities lies in the construction of great artifacts. Works bigger than men seem to imply in our deepest minds that we ourselves are more important than a glance would show.

I remember seeing my first skyscraper when I was ten (and thinking what an ugly word that was). My mother pointed to it outside the train station in Chicago and said, "Gosh, doesn't it make you feel insignificant?" I remember frowning up at the great stack of stone and thinking, "Why should it? We made it, not the other way around."

I suspect something like this animates Larry Niven's Ringworld, Asimov's Trantor, Bob Shaw's Orbitsville. The striking facet of the Ringworld is that it is indeed so vast that you cannot plausibly explore it in a human lifetime — but you can see it all in one glance, hanging in the sky.

This sense of locality promises closure, or at least a comfy relief from true immensity rather than embracing it. Such fictions capture the awe of infinity, but not its terror.

I find it intriguing that there is much modern horror fiction, but it is cozy, not confronting the terror of Pascal. After all, this fundamental fear cannot be personified, nor physically grappled with, nor even readily comprehended — and before it we, for all our majesty, are as ants.

Comments welcome at gbenford@uci.edu.

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Synchronicities are the stuff of zeitgeist. Lucy Sussex remarks that she was spurred to write this story by discovering some of the biographical and moral uncertainties in the life of Werner Heisenberg in books like David C. Cassidy's Uncertainty. *This story landed here around the same time that Michael Frayn's play* Copenhagen *opened on Broadway. Coincidence? Conspiracy? Confluence? There are some things we'll never fully know—which is as good a lead-in as any to a story about Mr. Uncertainty himself.*

Absolute Uncertainty

By Lucy Sussex

1. Heisenberg *probably* slept here.

A BLINK OF THE EYE, A quantum jump in place and time, to the island of Helgoland, off the coast of Germany, early twentieth century. Atoms coalesce, forming the silhouette, then the solid shape of a human, like a gradually colored-in picture from a children's book. For a moment the Watcher, still in jump-shock, is motionless; then he wraps his thin arms around his torso, feeling the cool wind from the sea, despite the tweed jacket and plus-fours, suitable wear of the period, according to the props department. He turns his head, assessing the surroundings. The little beach shack in which he stands, a perfect hide, is built of driftwood, the same dull color as the sand, its windows and one door open gaps. Open to the elements, thinks the Watcher, all of them....

The prompt-chip in his head says: "List them. Recall the drill: to offset loss of equilibrium after a jump, try a rote exercise to test and restore memory."

Obediently the Watcher starts to list aloud: "1, Hydrogen, 2, helium...." He continues, counting down through the periodic table: "...92,

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Uranium; 93, Neptunium; and 94 Plutonium, so-important Plutonium." Then he comes to a dead halt. Has plutonium been discovered yet? the Watcher thinks, confused. This is 1925, after all.

"Plutonium was only discovered in 1940, during research on the atomic bomb, recall?"

"I do...now."

The Watcher takes several steps forward to the nearest window. Outside the sky is overcast, leaden as the sea, which surges sullenly in lazy little wavelets. Salt grass tussocks quiver in the breeze; sand-grit sloughs from the dunes in fine dry streams. Otherwise, the only movement is a dot, far down the arc of bay, moving at a slow, meditative, walking pace.

"The target. I trust you remember that now. Werner Karl Heisenberg, physicist, Nobel laureate at thirty-two, devisor of the Uncertainty Principle...."

"But at this moment just twenty-four, very brilliant but unproven, and without university tenure."

The Watcher stares at the nearing dot, not needing the prompt anymore. He thinks of the elements, no element of Heisenberg, its constituent parts or electrons. German nationalist. Admirer of nature. Sufferer from allergies. Gifted classical pianist. Chess wizard. These are the quirks recorded in the biographies, but who knows what else has eluded the official record?

The Watcher crouches and draws in the sand of the hut, recapitulating, partly as aide-memoire, partly from admiration, an intellectual journey into the secret world of the atom. He keeps glancing up as the beachwalker nears and details become clearer: the thick sweater, the knapsack, and above all the one spot of color in the entire drear landscape, the young man's brush of reddish-blond hair. Entranced, the Watcher abandons his scribbles in sand. Then, from behind the headland, lightning stabs and crackles, followed by torrential rain. The figure looks here, there, then makes a dash for the single shelter nearby — the hide.

The Watcher puts his hand to his mouth. "This isn't supposed to happen! We're just here to observe, right, nothing interactive, no chance of upsetting the course of history?"

"Yes, but the limits of a jump are not totally knowable. We can predict, but not in fine detail."

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"Can we jump, like NOW?"

"Sorry, no. We'll just have to wing it."

Appalled, the Watcher cowers in a corner, as footsteps pound toward the hide. Werner Heisenberg, flame-headed, handsome and young, leaps inside, shaking the rain off him like a cat. Then he sees the movement in the corner of the hut.

"Bird watcher?" he says, in early twentieth-century German.

"Ja," the prompt replies (and lies), using its override to speak in the Watcher's voice. "Interesting migration patterns of stormy petrels here."

"Forgive me for intruding," Heisenberg says. "When the storm is over I will leave you to your birdwatching." He takes off his backpack and sits down on the floor of the hide. The body language says: conversation-verboten, I want to think.

The Watcher stares at him unblinkingly.

"Max Born was right," says the prompt to the Watcher, in private, silent-to-onlookers mode. "He thought the young Heisenberg 'looked like a simple farm boy.'"

Or, thinks the Watcher, unnerved, the Hitler youth, not so far away now, in 1925.

Around the hut lightning flickers and thunder beats on the air loud as snaredrums. Heisenberg's gaze moves, wandering free as his thoughts, from this Herr Birdwatcher to outside, then back again. Suddenly he stares as the lightning flashes yet again, temporarily banishing every shadow from the hut. He bends closer to inspect the sand, as the lightning takes another flash shot of the bay. Then he looks up at the Watcher.

"You have not completed this equation, sir."

The Watcher, unnerved, can only repeat the prompt's words: "Ja."

"May I?"

The youth reaches out, draws in the sand.

The Watcher nods, and responds with another sandy calculation, also incomplete.

Heisenberg glances at it, smiles and solves the problem with a few deft fingerlines. Another equation follows, then another, the pair talking the universal language of numbers.

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"I had not thought to encounter, in Helgoland, a kindred soul, a brother in physics," Heisenberg says.

More equations follow, the Watcher thoroughly enjoying himself, recapitulating the work of Heisenberg's predecessors, Planck, Born, Bohr. With a flourish of his fingers, he suddenly goes too far, and the young man frowns.

"You are very up to date. Too up to date, perhaps. It's uncanny.... Who *are* you?"

"A tourist," the Watcher says, knowing the answer is feeble.

"I know everybody in physics, everyone that matters, and now I think of it Helgoland is small — I should have surely heard if some Herr Professor Doctor or even a student had come holidaying."

He eyes the Watcher sharply.

"You are some researcher from America, the antipodes...surely not from the Bolshevists?"

His hand pats empty air at hip level, as though reaching for an imaginary gun.

The prompt butts in, answering the question. "What would the Bolshevists want with the interior of the atom? It is surely not in their collectivist philosophy...."

Heisenberg smiles, with a faint curl of the lip. "What would they want with atoms? Weapons, I suppose, so they could export their Red philosophy all over the world, not that anyone knows how you would derive weapons from theoretical physics, not yet...." He pauses, somber. "But the question still remains — who or what are you?"

The prompt says, to the Watcher alone: "Be careful. This is an abstract, logical, mathematical thinker in the extreme, not a spinner of fancies."

Even in his dreams? wonders the Watcher, and suddenly has a solution to this tricky situation. He thinks for a second, sure of his place in Heisenberg's personal time, then adds another set of symbols to the calculations on the floor. The young man goggles.

"But...but, that's something I've been thinking about, not published, not talked about to anyone, even to Bohr."

"You will," said the Watcher. "When you awake."

Heisenberg suddenly laughs, falls back onto the sand.

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"Cute," says the prompt. "He actually bought it!"

Heisenberg lies on his back, chuckling. Then he raises himself on one elbow. "But you must answer my question, Herr Birdwatcher, even in a dream. I repeat, what are you?"

"Let me handle this," says the prompt. To Heisenberg it says: "You remember Herr Dickens's little story, 'The Christmas Carol.'"

"Yes, the miser, and all the visiting ghosts of Christmas, come to teach him a moral story. If you are a physics ghost, maybe, you are not the ghost of physics past, not Herr Newton with his long wig, not with the math you do... And your physics is right up-to-date. So are you perhaps the ghost of physics present?"

His wide-set eyes look even wider.

"Not exactly."

"No, I've met Herr Einstein, and you aren't him.... Ah, you are the ghost of physics future?"

The Watcher eyes Heisenberg, seeing perfect calm and assurance.

"You don't seem surprised."

"No. Because it does not seem strange that I would have a visit from physics future...because I think I am part of that entity."

He cranes closer to the Watcher's face, then subsides, disappointed.

"Though I see you are not me...that physics future is not wearing the face of my older self."

"You seriously expect to be the future of physics?"

A slight, but perceptible nod. Really quite a handsome man, thinks the Watcher. Although an arrogant young shit.

"He's right, of course," says the prompt to the Watcher.

Yes, the Watcher concurs, he is right. He hesitates, unsure whether to voice the thought, but Heisenberg speaks first.

"Well, what have you to say to me, oh ghost from the future? I'm right, aren't I? Otherwise you wouldn't bother me with a visit. Because I wouldn't be important enough."

The young man smiles, triumphantly. The Watcher knows that something has changed, that his observation has now subtly influenced, and altered, the observed. What the real, the unobserved Heisenberg might be, cannot now be measured with any certainty. But Heisenberg won't think of that little idea for a few years in the future yet.

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"I have nothing to say," says the Watcher. "Except in the form of mathematics. Which is most important to you."

And he reaches for the blackboard of sand again. The dialogue of ideas continues, while the storm rages outside. After a while Heisenberg's eyes begin to droop, and his hand falls to the ground. He sinks back, and after a moment begins to snore, heartily and healthily.

"You dropped him, didn't you?" the Watcher charges the prompt.

"When he slapped at that sandfly, a few minutes ago. That was the stun."

"I thought that was strictly for emergencies."

"Well yes, but did we have any guarantee that he might suddenly decide that it was a little odd to be solving higher mathematical problems in his sleep and that he might be awake, after all?"

"Killjoy!"

"No, just being cautious. Are you sure you weren't teaching him matrix algebra? For that was the achievement of his trip to Helgoland."

The Watcher stands, and obliterates with his foot the sandlines of equations.

"Famously Heisenberg thought of it all by himself, during his sea bathing, long walks, and nights of solitary thinking, this form of mathematics so useful for describing the atom."

The Watcher says nothing, staring down at Heisenberg. The prompt continues: "Need I remind you more? Although matrix algebra had been devised in the 1850s, Heisenberg had never been taught it. Discovered it independently, he claimed, just like Leibnitz and Newton each developed calculus in Germany and England during the seventeenth century."

The Watcher only smiles. "Shall we go now?"

"Since our time here is up, yes."

A few moments later, the hut is empty, except for Heisenberg, deep in drugged sleep. The wind completes what the Watcher had begun, completely erasing the equations written on the sand of the floor.

Welcome, class! Today in Biocultural Studies 101 we will continue our examination of moral ambiguities and the limits of biography. We will focus on a real slippery customer, I mean a prime example, in this session: Werner Karl Heisenberg, twentieth-century physicist in what

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used to be called Germany, quantum mechanic, theorist of the uncertainty principle, and worker on the alternate atomic weapon of the 1940s, the "Nazi" bomb. Using what is known about Heisenberg, an interactive template has been constructed. Now we will employ that template in a series of extrapolations, using the sim-module to examine aspects of Heisenberg and his times. Last session the class chose points in Heisenberg's life for observation and exploration. We have just experienced the first, from 1925, in which use was made of a time-traveler (™ H. G. Wells, 1895) going back to encounter Heisenberg as a young man. Do we have any questions?

Yes, the prompt is a personal, portable, Artificial Intelligence, there to supply our Watcher with a limitless source of information and advice. Just what the time tourist needs.

Well-spotted. Yes, that was stock sim-footage in the beach scenes. Helgoland is a barren lump of rock off the coast of Germany, without anything growing. Heisenberg went there because he had hayfever. And he came back cured and with matrix algebra, though nobody is quite sure how.

No more questions? On to the next observation, and this time, let's have some input from the class. I want to see you using your personal modules for some REALLY creative interactions.

2. "On the Perceptual Content of Quantum Theoretical Kinematics and Mechanics" by Werner Heisenberg, 1927

The scene is night, showing a prison camp, bare, cleared space in the middle of a forest, the boundary marked by barbed wire, forest outside, wasteland of huts and dirt within. The night is cold, the breath of the guards in the watchtowers forming white mist on the air. There is no other movement, apart from a slight scurry under one of the huts. A rat, maybe.

A logo comes up in the empty air, then fades. It reads: QUANTUMSTEIN

Digits appear in the sky, like neon stars, counting down. Then figures, their heads little more than dots, their bodies clad in striped prison pajamas, creep out from under the huts, running across the bare earth and toward the wire. Dogs bark, an alarm shrills, searchlights sweep the

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enclosure, a machine gun chatters and spits. Yet, amidst the noise and confusion, the hit rate of the game seems very low; as a searchlight impinges on a figure, it immediately dodges and leaps aside into the darkness.

The Watcher, situated in an empty lookout tower, eyes the confusion, and — very occasionally — bloodshed.

"I don't think Heisenberg would ever have envisaged the Uncertainty Principle in these terms."

"Well yes, Hitler only came to power in 1933, some time after his formulation of the principle," replies the prompt. "But the analogy is not without merit. Theoretical physics had hit a blank wall trying to determine the exact position of electrons within the atom. Heisenberg pointed out that in order to observe the electron, you must illuminate it by short-wave electromagnetic radiation. But the illumination, when it strikes the electron, affects it, altering its position. Therefore, because the act of observation changes the motion of the electron, it cannot be measured with certainty. Thus are the limits to knowledge revealed."

Down below the Watcher, some figures lie still on the ground, some have doubled back to the huts, a few are still approaching the wire.

"Einstein hated the Uncertainty Principle."

"He also hated Hitler."

"Who hated Einstein and 'Jewish science.' But think what the haters had in common: a belief in absolute certainty, a god's eye, Hitler's eye, classical physics view of the world, where all could be explained, in terms of science, or the 'Jewish world conspiracy.'"

A figure reaches the wire; and simultaneously freezes, as do the other figures and the moving searchlights. A logo appears in the air, flashing: GAME OVER!

The Watcher says: "A win for the inmates."

"Or their player," says the prompt.

The Watcher is silent a moment, musing. "Heisenberg was lucky the Nazis never realized the implications of the Uncertainty Principle."

Above them the GAME OVER! sign vanishes, as does the QUANTUMSTEIN logo.

"They had better things to do," says the prompt, "like creating their version of utopia."

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The scene changes subtly, the forest outside becoming more threatening, the guards in the towers more clearly delineated, square-jawed, their uniforms bursting with muscle, their faces fair and achingly handsome. Another logo appears, very simple and stark, a cross twisted on its axis, with starkly angled arms. The figures under the huts appear again, this time sporting symbols on their pajamas, little red hammer+sickles, or yellow stars, or pink triangles. Despite the symbol they all have the same caricatured features, hook-nosed, weasel-eyed and cunning. They bolt for the wire again, to the cacophony of dogs and guns, the sound effects louder and accompanied by sweeping symphonic music. Yet this time each searchlight finds its victim unerringly, the shots ring out, the figure falls bloody. The score appears like a beacon in the night sky, the numbers constantly changing, keeping score of the carnage below. Red symbols are worth 20 points, pink triangles 10 and the yellow star 50. Within a very short time the score hits 1000, and the game is over, every prisoner still and dead on the ground.

There is a long silence, broken by the prompt: "Some have said that Hitler should have been a science fiction writer, expressing his antisocial urges in pulp utopias. I beg to differ. I think he would have been supremely happy as a sim games designer."

The Watcher sighs. "I don't think I much like this game of HITLERSTEIN."

"You object to the racial stereotyping? He'd have loved it. Gorgeous Aryans annihilating Jews, gays, communists, all Hitler's enemies caught in the searchlights, machine-gunned dead in seconds."

The Watcher steps onto the parapet of the tower, then into space. He floats down like a snowflake, landing lightly beside a stripe-clad body.

"Hitlerstein is too simplistic by far. And dull.... There's no chance, no excitement. Every shot kills, every hit jacks up the score. Only an idiot would thrill to it."

He strolls among the still figures, finally stopping beside one, face down in a larger pool of blood than the rest. Is it his imagination, or does the close-cropped fuzz of hair have a reddish-blond tinge?

The prompt continues: "There weren't many theoretical physicists in concentration camps. The Jewish professors lost their jobs in the thirties and emigrated. So did the few women physicists, who also lost

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their jobs, though they were merely faced with kinder and küchen. Others joined the exodus: even non-Jewish physicists, like Schrödinger of the famous cat, left. Heisenberg stayed, despite being an exponent of Einsteinian, 'Jewish' physics. That required guts...or an uncommon amount of sheer stubborn patriotism."

"Home is where the heartland is," says the Watcher. He kneels down, gently turning the figure on its back. The face, peaceful in death-sleep, is despite the bloodstains recognizably an older Heisenberg.

"To get here would have meant active resistance against Hitler. Real heroism...or martyrdom. Not many people have that."

He lays the figure down again, then gets to his feet.

"Instead people resisted in their minds only," says the prompt. "Hoping Hitler was just a temporary aberration, soon overthrown. They were afraid. Or passive. Even complicit?"

The Watcher sighs. "Prompt, let's get out of here!"

Own up! Who thought of Hitlerstein? That was really grotesque. Should have guessed it, Reet, of course. Might have known you'd drag your pet gaming in here somehow.

On to the third observation, this time not using Heisenberg, but different, though related templates. Not so much is known of these originals, although they had, via their connections, vital importance to this biohistory.

3. The White Jew of Leipzig

In an immaculate sitting room, two middle-aged women take tea, surrounded by antimacassars, overstuffed furniture, a flower arrangement underneath a crucifix and portraits of family members. Pride of place on the mantelpiece is a framed photo of a bespectacled, pudgy man, the spit image, though in drag, of the Frau playing mother, pouring the tea. He wears a swastika on one black uniformed arm, and next to him stands the Fuhrer.

Heisenberg's mother accepts the proffered cup, and sips. She doesn't look much like her son.

Now she speaks: "I appeal to you, on the strength of our family's friendship."

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"Your father was acquainted with my late husband, through their membership of a school's hiking club," the older woman says with a tinge of frost.

"He always spoke highly of your husband," says Frau Heisenberg.

"They were men of German honor."

"As are our sons."

The other woman looks at the mantel photograph, smiles."I am very proud of Heinrich," she says. "But I never interfere in his affairs."

"I am very proud of my Werner, too," says Frau Heisenberg. The other woman lifts her hand.

"Frau Heisenberg, I am not political, not like my son, and I know nothing of physics, which is what your son does. Why should I take note of an article about your son, politics *and* physics?"

"Because it appeared in *Das Swarze Korps*, the newspaper of your son's organization, the Schutzstaffel."

"He is Reichsfuhrer-SS, and far above such things as a mere article. Why does your son simply not write to the editor?"

"Because," Frau Heisenberg says carefully, "they called him a White Jew. It will take more than a letter to the editor of the SS-paper to refute that. Shall I quote it to you? They said he was a representative of Judaism in German spiritual life, who ought — along with all the other White Jews — to be eliminated just as the Jews themselves must be."

The other woman puts down her cup carefully, glances at the crucifix then back again.

Frau Heisenberg continues: "My son is a good physicist and a good German. I am not asking you much, just to take this letter, from my son, which is addressed to your son. If it is sent by normal channels, he fears it will not get there."

"And so the need for abnormal channels!" She looks affronted at the thought of being anything else than normal.

"What else am I to do? I am not political, but I know that my son is not a White Jew. We mothers know our sons, and we care for them. That is why I have come to you."

She reaches into her handbag, brings out the letter.

"We care for our sons, that is what a mother does," says the other woman. "You for your Werner and I for my Heinrich." She reaches out and takes the letter.

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Heisenberg's mother says: "Thank you, Frau Himmler."

Strange but true, strange but true. Next to that little encounter, a time traveler and a Nazi sim game seem positively ordinary. When in trouble with the Nazi regime, send Mother to the rescue. Yes, Heisenberg's grandfather and Himmler's father really did go on school hikes together. And a letter sent by Mum-post prompted an extensive SS investigation into Heisenberg, at the end of which he was cleared of the charge of being a White Jew. He could continue with his research, just so long as he didn't mention who it was came up with the theory of relativity, nor any other Jewish theorists.

Ah, a question. Reet? Didn't see much input from you this time. You want to know what the fringed lampshade was made of? I think I know what this is about. Who did the lampshade? Ah, Matt — stock sim footage again? Thought so. Reet, don't look so disappointed. Yes, I know Himmler is supposed to have owned a lampshade made of human skin, harvested in the concentration camps, but no images of it have survived. Thank goodness. And I certainly don't think he would have given it to his mother.

Next observation, out of sequence, but it continues with our attempts to create an alternate history of Heisenberg, as opposed to what, as in the previous observation, is verified by the historical sources.

4. Rattling the tin can

"When I am by myself, I now easily fall into a very strange state, which belongs neither to the past nor to the future and neither to you nor to physics, and with which nothing can be done." Heisenberg to Elisabeth Schumacher, 1937

Leipzig in January 1937, wintry and cold. The Watcher wanders down the snowy streets, rugged up in comforter, astrakhan hat, woolen mitts and a heavy military-style greatcoat. He passes hausfraus with baskets, students playing snowballs, children trailing sleighs. It would be impossibly

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Christmassy and nostalgic were it not for the occasional glimpse of a Nazi uniform, leaving a jackbooted trail in the fresh snow.

On a street corner, a solitary figure marches to and fro, stamping his feet to keep warm. As the Watcher nears, the figure edges toward him, proffering a tin can. A beggar, in the middle of the third Reich?

"Hallo, Herr Professor Doctor Heisenberg," says the prompt.

The beggar stares, his face tired and wan as candle wax. "You know me? You do look slightly familiar. A former student, maybe?"

"I am shocked to see you out in this cold, begging," says the Watcher with sincerity.

"Ah," says Heisenberg. "You think perhaps I have lost my position? No, Doctor Goebbels has decreed that all university staff shall assist in collecting extra funds, for the fourth anniversary of the Reich...which will be on the 30th of January. Even Professors must help in this great effort. Hence the tin can."

He speaks deadpan, without the slightest sign of irony.

"You have changed," says the Watcher. "From Helgoland in 1925."

Heisenberg starts, looks closely at the face under the fur hat. He speaks, half to himself: "I had thought, in this cold and snow, that I was drifting in and out of a dream state...and now I see a figure from a dream of twelve years ago, the mathematical birdwatcher from Helgoland."

He falls silent, staring at the Watcher for several minutes.

The prompt adds, for the Watcher's benefit: "He is indeed in a strange frame of mind, possibly caused by severe anemia. Years later he wrote that 'the houses in these narrow streets seemed very far away and almost unreal, as if they had already been destroyed and only their pictures remained behind: people seemed transparent, their bodies having, so to speak, abandoned the material world so that only their spirits remained behind.' Quite poetic, really, for a physicist."

Now the prompt addresses both the Watcher and Heisenberg:

"How democratic of the new Germany, to have Nobel-winning academicians collecting for the Reich."

Heisenberg's face twists slightly, in bitter if unvoiced disagreement. "We have no choice," he says in an undertone. "Oh ghost of physics future, what I could be doing if I was not forced to stand on an icy street corner, collecting pfennigs from those as frightened as I am?"

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"It seems utterly senseless and futile," says the Watcher.

"It is, and so is everything around me — Elisabeth apart. I am engaged now, Herr Ghost. Shall I show you a photograph of her?"

He fumbles with the buttons on his coat, clearly intending to reach into an inner pocket, but in the process drops his can into the snow. The Watcher retrieves it. "No don't, I wouldn't want you to freeze...besides I've seen photos of Elisabeth, and she is a fine young woman."

"So...I remain significant in the physics of the future." The face assumes some of its old confidence. "That is something worth knowing at least."

"Though not for the same reasons," mutters the prompt. "Significant because notorious...."

The Watcher ignores the little voice. He is trying to hand the can back to Heisenberg, but the physicist, lost in thought, ignores it. A man in Nazi uniform strides by; the Watcher automatically proffers the can with its little swastika, and is rewarded with the tinkle of a small-denomination coin.

"I will admit I was worried. Is it still a truism of your time, Herr Physics-Future, that a man does his best physics very young? Planck was an exception, though, coming up with quantum physics at forty-two. You see, I need, amidst all this madness, to know that I can still do something important for science."

"You will," said the Watcher. "You will."

"If morally quite deplorable," mutters the prompt.

Heisenberg shakes hands, in pure gratitude, with the Watcher, and in the process has the can thrust into his hand again. He smiles dazzlingly and approaches the next passers-by as if buoyed by extra hidden heat and life. While his back is turned, the Watcher takes a few steps sideways, into the shadowy shelter of an overhanging porch, and then, into oblivion.

"Should you have given him hope?" says the prompt. "Without it, he might have dusted the snow of Nazi Germany off his shoes and headed off to a cosy professorship in the Americas."

"And the Los Alamos project, ultimately," says the Watcher.

"German bomb, Allied bomb, what's the difference? Still killing machines."

"But the German bomb never killed anyone."

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"Heisenberg's reputation apart," says the prompt.

Yes, I know that observation was chronologically out of order. Heisenberg got called a White Jew and investigated by Himmler after his marriage, not before. The Nazis brought him to his lowest ebb, but when his patriotism proved impeccable, they gave him hope—a juicy scientific problem. Nuclear fission had been discovered by 1940...the question now arose, how could you harness this force into something uniquely destructive? The trouble was that others were thinking along these lines, too.

5. A cozy walk in Denmark.

The scene is a courtroom with, improbably, down the middle of it a walk, lined with northern, deciduous trees. A judge, lawyers, the jury of Biocultural students, all watch two men, wearing suits of the 1940s, pace down the walk, talking furiously, sometimes toppling over the brink into argument. At the end they freeze in frame, then reverse, going back to the beginning of the walk again in furious backward motion, talking gobbledygook. At the beginning of the walk, Heisenberg, now balding, graying and slightly thicker in the waist, looks confident, the other, an older man, with thick lips and heavy eyebrows, wary. The sequence repeats, freezing again at the end; Heisenberg looks frustrated, his companion shell-shocked.

The Judge says: "Who is the council for the defense?"

The Watcher stands, peeking shyly from under the curls of his powdered wig: "I am."

He sits.

"And the council for the prosecution?"

Again the Watcher stands. "I am," says the prompt.

"Fine, so long as we know who is speaking. Call the first witness."

"Call Neils Bohr!"

The older man steps out of the freeze-frame, and walks unhurriedly to the witness box, where he is sworn in. His voice is slow and very soft.

The prompt speaks: "In 1941, when Denmark was occupied by Germany, you received a visit from your former student and scientific

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collaborator, Werner Heisenberg. This was an official visit, on behalf of the Reich."

Bohr nods. "At that time the occupation was relatively benign: there was the illusion of self-rule, even cultural exchanges. Thus we had Heisenberg come to the Copenhagen Institute for Theoretical Physics, proposing cooperation between German and Danish science."

"For what purpose?"

"So that Germany could win the war, he was quite open about that."

"And how did you and your colleagues feel about this?"

Bohr looks miserable. "None of us liked the idea at all."

"You had personal reasons here, that I should like you to tell the court."

"My mother was Jewish. I knew what that meant, in Nazi terms. There were eight thousand Jews in Denmark, although no attempt was made to arrest us at first. It was not until 1943 that we had warning of deportations and my family fled to neutral Sweden...along with nearly all the Jews of Denmark."

"A remarkable escape," says the prompt. "But we were talking of two years earlier, and Heisenberg's visit."

"Heisenberg was my friend, I invited him to dinner, though Margrethe, my wife, objected. Afterward we went for a walk."

"What happened?"

"The end of a twenty-year friendship."

"Tell us more."

"You must understand that when fission happened, we physicists knew about it very quickly. I helped spread the news at a conference in the United States, and published on the subject within months."

"Indeed, an important paper. But on the theoretical aspects only."

Bohr nods again.

"Heisenberg wanted to talk to me privately about fission. Applied aspects, this time. I soon realized he was trying to pump me for information. We all knew what fission might mean, in terms of the war effort."

"You refer to the atomic bomb?"

Another nod. "Then he changed tack. He asked me about what such a weapon might do, in the wrong hands. He knew I had contact with American scientists, even in occupied Denmark. Would not it be better,

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he said, for scientists not to work on this bomb, and let the war be decided by more conventional, less catastrophic means? Whose scientists? I wondered to myself. Whose hands are the wrong hands?"

"And what was your conclusion?" the prompt asks.

"That there was a German bomb on the way, that Heisenberg was involved at an important level, and that he wanted me somehow to retard the development of the Allied bomb...as if I could!"

"Objection!" shouts the Watcher. "Witness is making unsupported surmises about the defendant's motives."

"But that was what I thought," Bohr says mildly. "And that is what I told my family, and the scientists at the Institute, and the Danish underground, who of course conveyed it to the Allies."

"What was your impression of Heisenberg's moral state?"

"Oh, he was as confident as ever. Blindly confident. He knew he was right. I wondered if he'd been tainted by that terrible regime, and could distinguish right from wrong anymore."

The Watcher says: "There are two sides to every story."

"Indeed," says the Judge. "Thank you, Professor Bohr, that will do. Call Professor Heisenberg."

Heisenberg stalks out of the freeze frame and to the dock.

"Professor Heisenberg," says the Judge. "You heard the preceding testimony."

"I did, and I regret to say that my dear friend Bohr misunderstood me. I proposed, at the risk of my skin, a joint effort by Allied and Axis scientists to prevent the development of the bomb. All it would require would be twelve of us in agreement: myself, Bohr, Fermi, Oppenheimer, for instance."

The prompt says: "A most unlikely agreement."

"Nonetheless I proposed it. And, moreover, I kept my part of the bargain. I headed the project for the German bomb, and it was never developed. I did not have the blood of thousands of civilians on my hands, like the Allied scientists...."

Bohr rises to his feet, protesting in Danish. Heisenberg answers, in German, shouting, and the court is in uproar.

Two sides to every story, eh? What did you, as jury, make of that? Still uncertain? Let's call another witness.

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6. Goudsmit's version

An American army officer steps into the witness box. His voice is accented, his glasses round; despite the uniform he has the look of an intellectual.

"You are Samuel Goudsmit, theoretical physicist," says the Judge.

"One of the few in America not working on the bomb." There is some nervous laughter around the courtroom. "Thus the uniform. I was selected to be scientific head of task force ALSOS precisely because I knew nothing about the Manhattan project. An ideal man, then, to send to Germany in the process of liberation."

The prompt says: "For what purpose?"

"To find out how far the Germans had got with their bomb project. To secure firstly their uranium and send it back to the Manhattan Project. To secure secondly all relevant information on the Nazi bomb. That meant also the scientists involved, including Heisenberg."

"Secure?"

"Out of the Ruskies' hands."

"So what happened?"

"ALSOS followed the occupying Allies to Strasbourg, where the German Physics Laboratory was. That gave us papers that said Haigerloch, in the Black Forest, was the place to go. Trouble was it looked like the French, coming from one direction, or the Russians, from another, would liberate the area first. We put on a spurt, beat them to Haigerloch, where we found an atomic pile just short of going critical. We didn't find Heisenberg until a few days later, with his family in Bavaria. Colonel Pash went after him and had a helluva journey — climbing over snow passes, exchanging enemy fire, repairing bridges, trying to fend off German units who just wanted someone to surrender to. But at the end of it he arrested Heisenberg."

"You interrogated him?"

"Sure, when Pash brought him back to Heidelberg."

"Did you mention your parents?"

Goudsmit takes off his glasses, wipes then replaces them. "I thought you'd bring this up."

"Yes, so you can tell the court what happened."

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"My parents stayed in Holland when I went to the States. I nagged them and nagged them, no Jews are safe in Europe, you gotta get out! They'd just managed to get their travel papers in '43 when...I heard they'd been rounded up and deported."

"How was Heisenberg involved in this?"

"Well, he'd stayed with me at the University of Michigan in '39, and was definitely the most influential person I knew in Germany. Friends in Holland asked for his help."

"I wrote a letter, as requested, on behalf of Goudsmit's parents," responds Heisenberg from the dock.

"Yeah, but it was too late. Two old people, never did harm to anyone, ended up in the gas chambers."

"Ahem," says the Watcher, remembering his role of defense counsel again. "You upbraided Heisenberg because of this, during the interrogation?"

"Not during. Informally, before."

"And you hold this against him eternally?"

A pause. "No, not anymore. Wasn't much he could have done, I guess."

In the dock Heisenberg gives a slight, approving nod.

"But I do hold other things against him. After the war he ran that line he used on Bohr again — how he tried to hold back the progress of the German bomb. That was a lie, at the beginning at least. Later I reckon he came to believe it was true."

"He didn't try to stop the bomb?" asks the Watcher.

"I know science jocks. Heisenberg wasn't any different from Oppenheimer and the rest. You have a problem in applied physics, how to make the biggest bang in the world, ever. Now wouldn't you give the problem everything you had, so you could be first, and famous? Give us a break!"

"We will break," says the Judge. "Before the next witnesses."

Hmn. Who programmed the Goudsmit template? Ah, Le. You forgot halfway through he came from Holland, not Brooklyn. The accent went all over the place. But, that apart, the sentiments were accurate, what he might, less colloquially, have said.

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7. The English Manor

A trio waits beside the witness box; an English major, armed and in uniform, a woman in a thick tweed suit and flowerpot hat, and a young, donnish man with tousled hair and thick glasses.

The Judge says: "Major Cotton?"

"Yes, sir!" The major almost marches into the witness box.

"You are in intelligence?"

"All my army life, sir!"

"I understand you were responsible for Farm Hall."

"Yes sir! We had a problem: ten captured German bomb scientists. Some of the Yanks wanted to shoot them, but we knew they were valuable people. We just needed to keep them on ice, while certain things transpired...."

"The Manhattan Project?"

"Absolutely correct, sir. And it was quite nice ice, a little rural manor house with barbed wire around it, quite the cushiest internment camp in England. I got the idea from Bletchley Park, sir, where the cryptographers were. They'd talk shop, maths shop, all the time, and I said then, if Jerry ever got a mike in here.... That gave me the idea. We'd save ourselves the bother of further interrogations, let our German friends do the interrogation themselves, talking politics and physics to the listening walls. Every room in Farm Hall was wired, even the latrines."

"Thank you," says the Judge. "You may go. Miss Margot Parkes!"

The tweedy woman enters the witness box nervously.

"Miss Parkes, you are a translator, and you worked on the Farm Hall tapes. Do you remember August 6, 1945, well?"

"Of course! Hiroshima. It caused quite a stir among the interned Germans."

"You transcribed and translated their words accurately?"

She says, levelly, "Upon my honor."

The trees in the center of the courtroom have gradually disappeared during the course of the trial, and now the dock enlarges, filling the space. It becomes a dollhouse, one wall missing, with Heisenberg inside, setting up a chess game. A door behind him opens, and a group of men enter, one of whom sits opposite Heisenberg, joining him in the game. The rest

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lounge around the table, or lean against the wall, smoking, drinking, talking among themselves. Their voices and stances are outwardly relaxed, but there is an underlying tension.

From the distance a radio plays the BBC news theme. The men listen, their jaws slowly starting to drop. Then hubbub ensues, in German.

Miss Parkes translates: "They could not believe the Americans could have beaten them to a bomb. It was inconceivable. How had they done it?"

Heisenberg grabs a pad, starts calculating furiously. Several others lean over his shoulder. The rest argue; Heisenberg grimly continues on. Finally he slams the book shut, speaking authoritatively:

"He said the American bomb must have contained several tons of uranium...an amount we Germans would have had the greatest difficulty in obtaining. Of that I am absolutely certain!"

The don shakes his head. "The Hiroshima bomb only contained fifteen kilograms of uranium. That was all that was needed, for a critical mass, chain reaction and explosion. If the Heisenberg team had got several tons together, they'd have blown a sizeable chunk out of Germany."

"So the German estimate of critical mass was wrong?" says the Judge.

The don nods significantly at Heisenberg. "Biggest mistake he ever made, unless you count not getting out of Nazi Germany in the first place."

"The Farm Hall tapes don't lie, sir," says Major Cotton. "They don't show any reluctance about the bomb, nor regret...except that Germany had lost the war."

"Yes," says the Watcher, "But who would want to see their country defeated, trampled over by invading armies, no matter how hideous its rulers?"

Nobody answers, and in a moment the question becomes rhetorical, as from within Farm Hall one of the German scientist speaks. Whatever he says, it makes the internees looked as if they have been whipped.

Miss Parkes translates:

"He said: 'If the Americans have a uranium bomb, then you're all second-raters. Poor old Heisenberg.'"

8. "When I hear about Schrödinger's cat, I reach for my gun." Stephen Hawking

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Well, what have you decided, class-jury? Is Heisenberg guilty as charged, or innocent? Yes, I see you pause, a rich source of moral ambiguity, indeed. What's that, you want to explore his uncertainties even further? But we're going on to President Chelsea Clinton and her moral ambiguities next session, we haven't time. Oh, all right, use the Berg template, I'd forgotten all about it. Just don't take too long.

The German scientists file out of the dollhouse dock, and sit among the audience. Heisenberg remains, head in hands, as the remaining wall of the dock slowly replaces itself, leaving only a doorway-sized space.

"Your honor," says the Watcher, "the jury have asked for a thought experiment. We will seal Heisenberg in this box, with a trained executioner. When the box is closed these two will return to Zurich, 1944, where they once met. The executioner is here today, he has heard all the evidence in the case. He let Heisenberg off once before; now he must decide again, and execute capital punishment, if he so decides."

"Oh," says the don. "Schrödinger's bloody cat...."

"Or not so bloody cat," the Watcher continues serenely. "There is a fifty-fifty chance of it surviving. But we do not know that, because outside the box we cannot hear the executioner's gun. Therefore, to us, the cat — in this case a wily ginger tom — is, while unobserved, both alive and dead, or neither, in a state of suspended animation."

"And the jury avoid coming to a decision, and thus abrogate any responsibility in the case," continues the prompt. "How well have they learnt their moral ambiguities!"

"But where is this executioner?" says the Judge.

The Watcher reaches into his pocket, removes a black handkerchief and folds it into a neat origami hat. "You may need this, or not, Mr. Berg."

He hands it to the Judge, who takes off his wig and black gown, revealing a forties-style suit underneath. He pulls out a pair of tortoiseshell glasses from a top pocket, puts them on, stares at the don, then ruffles his hair, in imitation.

"Moses Berg!" says Major Cotton. The Judge snaps to attention. "Your mission, should you choose to accept it — and I want to make clear there is no choice here — is to impersonate a physicist."

The Judge starts to protest.

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"We know you have no physics."

"I'm a ballplayer, sir. Boston Red Sox."

"Yes, but you have excellent German, and the knack of getting on with everybody. Very useful thing, in a spy. Your mission is to attend a colloquium in Zurich, December 1944. Your target, Professor Heisenberg, is giving a talk there. He is head of the Nazi atom bomb project. Find out whether he is a significant threat to the Allies and if he is, shoot him."

He hands his gun to Berg, who puts it in his pocket, and strides to the dock-box. As he enters, it goes dark inside, showing starry night and city lights. The wall closes behind him and the court waits, staring at the box.

9. Moe Berg judges.

Two men walk through the dark of wartime Zurich, exchanging after-dinner talk, banalities for one, who is happiest talking physics, a smokescreen for the other, hiding his thoughts.

The spy business is screwy, thinks Moe Berg, but this beats everything. I told them, I told those guys back at the OSS in Washington, this is right outa my area. "Yes," they said, "but you're smart, a quick learner, and an excellent listener. We have every confidence you'll make the right decision in this case."

Moe sighs, feeling the weight of the gun in his suit pocket. One week ago, he had been sitting in a lecture theater, among an audience of guys in tweedy suits with glasses. He had taken lots of notes, but there was nothing said about the bomb, only something called S-matrix theory. After the question time, which was equally abstruse, he'd gone down to the podium and mingled with all the people shaking hands and chatting to Heisenberg. Moe knew how to insinuate himself into a gathering, work it until he had met all the important people present. This colloquium was no different from a cocktail party, even if the conversation was uniquely rarified. And at the end of the gathering he'd gotten himself invited to a private dinner party for Heisenberg. Even sat next to him, in fact, gun in pocket. Was it proper etiquette to shoot dead a dinner guest, however morally suspect? Should you do it before the soup course, and put people off eating, or over coffee, and make them vomit up their meal?

"How fine it would be if we had won the war," Heisenberg had said.

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Well, that caused a hiccup in the table talk. There would have been spies from all sides at the table, besides Berg, and the host, Paul Scherrer, Professor of Experimental Physics at the Zurich Poly, and Berg's contact. Even now Berg suspected the information was speeding toward Roosevelt, on the one hand, and the Gestapo on the other, who would be furious. Such a defeatist remark bordered on treason to the German cause. Heisenberg could be shot for it...if Berg didn't get there first.

Conversation, though, in this short walk back to Heisenberg's hotel, sticks to neutral subjects. After all, this is neutral Switzerland, crammed with refugees and also money, hidden in Nazi bank accounts or those of their concentration camp victims. Three years earlier you might have passed the drunken James Joyce, blissfully unaware that a word he invented in *Finnegans Wake* would be attached to a sub-atomic particle, the quark.

Moe glances sideways at Heisenberg, tries to imagine that broad face, with its freckles and clear bright eyes, under a Nazi uniform cap. It doesn't fit; but Moe still can't see this man wearing a halo either. Was he constructing a bomb? That was what the OSS wanted to know. Some of the refugee scientists back at Los Alamos were sure of it, had even offered to assassinate Heisenberg themselves — something Moe had chuckled over. As if they'd be allowed out of the U.S., let alone anywhere they might fall into enemy hands.

Moe had been in Rome, talking to captured Italian scientists; he'd overheard some pretty interesting stuff at the colloquium and the dinner party. Everybody had their own opinion, and now Berg had to decide about this man. One thing is certain, Heisenberg is a genius, and either innocent, well, as innocent as you can be heading a weapons project in Nazi Germany, or as bad as the regime he serves. At the moment, though, he seems indeterminate.

Leaving good or bad aside, thinks Berg, the mission comes down to two things. If he is as brilliant as people say, then America's winning the war depends on his death, before the Nazis make their bomb and use it. Or else he has no importance, because what is he doing outside Germany, lecturing on a subject without military significance? The Americans sure wouldn't let their own bomb scientists do that. Moreover, Heisenberg has no bodyguards, so the Nazis clearly aren't worried about him.

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Berg turns his head slightly, and sees for a moment, in the shadows, Nazi goons in greatcoats, armed to the teeth. Then they are gone, in the wink of an eye.

"A pleasant night for a walk," says Heisenberg.

"Yes," says Berg. Over this man he has the power of life, to leave him at the door of his hotel, ready for a good night's sleep; or death from the metal warm under his fingers, that bright smile frozen in a rictus, that brilliant mind stopped forever. To kill or not to kill? He has run the pros and cons over in his own, far less brilliant mind.

And yet, he is still uncertain.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

OUR COVER STORY for the May issue comes to us from the prolific Paul Di Filippo, who has a knack for keeping in tune with the times. His latest story, "Doing the Unstuck," draws its inspiration from the music of The Cure. You don't need to have heard of this group to appreciate Mr. Di Filippo's unusual invasion story, but those of you who know Robert Smith's work will particularly enjoy this one.

Also on the docket for next month is a new tale from Richard Bowes, "The Ferryman's Wife." Mr. Bowes is best-known around these parts for his Kevin Grierson stories, but since he finished them up, he has been turning his talents to tales of time rangers. "The Ferryman's Wife" is the first such story we get to bring to you, a compelling picture of life in the suburbs in the 1950s...but with a few twists in the fabric of time.

The list of other stories making their way to you in the coming months looks good: a new novelet by Maureen F. McHugh, Allen Steele and His Super-Fantastic Parody, John Morressy's latest Kedrigern caper, novellas by Kate Wilhelm and Ian Watson, and works from new writers like Laird Barron, Charles Coleman Finlay, and Benjamin Rosenbaum. Expect the unexpected, the fantastic, and perhaps even the sublime.

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CURIOSITIES

TEENOCRACY

BY ROBERT SHIRLEY (1969)

IN A HUGE stadium, before a bloodthirsty crowd of screaming adolescents, under the eye of network television cameras, the ex-pop star President of the United States forces his Cabinet members to risk their lives playing Russian Roulette in the ultimate test of their loyalty.

An episode from those Generation Gap thinkpieces, *Logan's Run* (1967) or *Wild in the Streets* (1968)? Perhaps one of the scenarios from DC Comics's short-lived 1973 title *Prez*, featuring the "first teen president"? No, this moment of alarmist hyperbole comes from Robert Shirley's *Teenocracy*, a campily compelling future history whose retrospective unlikelihood reveals just how wrong a linear sf projection can be.

In 1979 came the great Teen Strike, propelling a rocker known only as the Fab into the Presidency of the USA, hereafter renamed the United Teenocracy. Stripped of the vote, oldsters are not otherwise persecuted, and twelve years onward the ruling teens mainly indulge themselves in hedonism ("hepsi" is the artificial aphrodisiac of choice, which leads to "coiting") while the economy hums smoothly along. The Fab's Veep, Ken Catto — aka King Cat — is the real star of this novel, a conflicted ex-teen whose subtle rebellion against his power-mad friend forms the main narrative.

Shirley convincingly portrays home VCRs, a proto-internet, virtual reality, genetic engineering, and rampant American imperialism and consumerism (the "Secretary of Style" is an important office). But such antique riffs as "panty raids" and the secession of Mississippi, along with his reality-blindsided doomsaying, ultimately make us say, "Don't trust any novels over thirty."

— Paul Di Filippo

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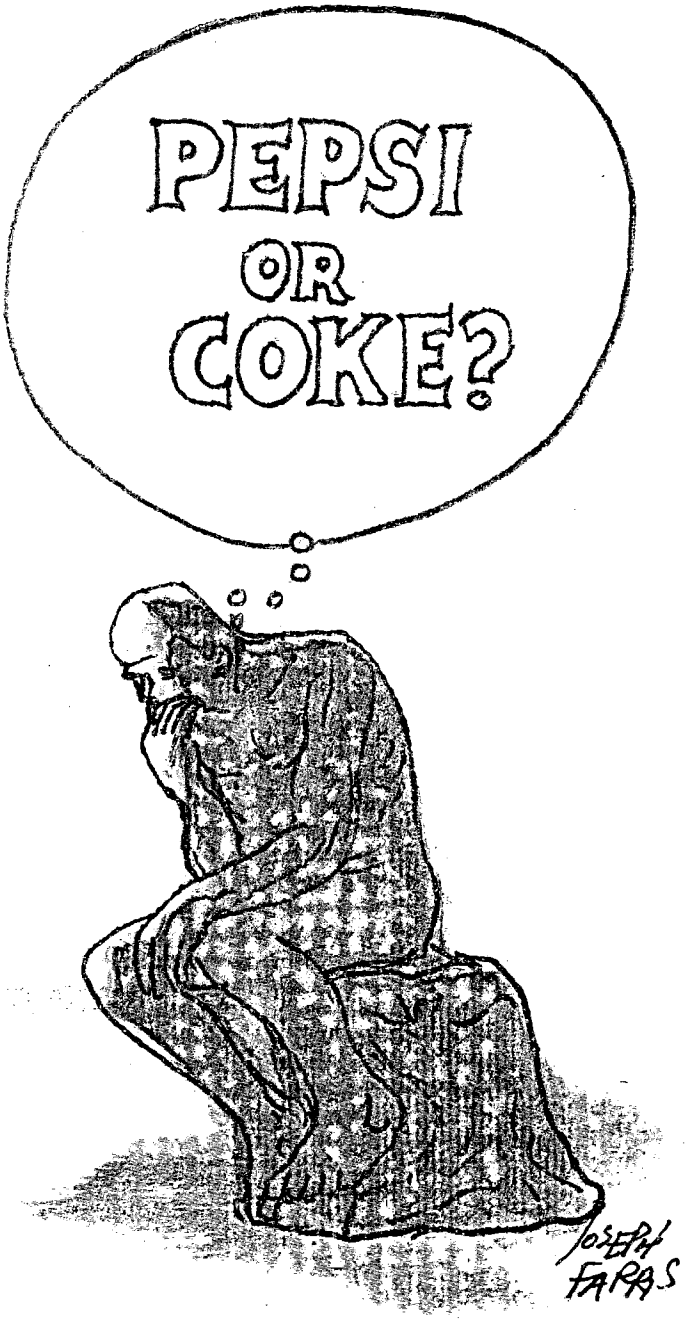

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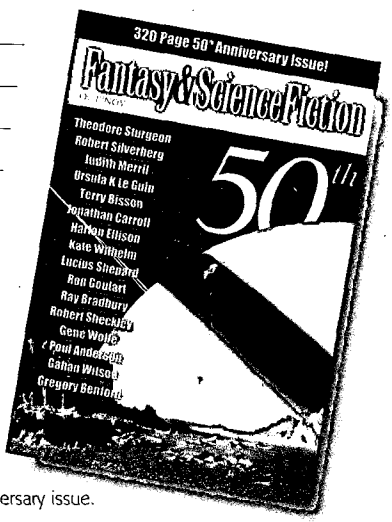

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